Sex-e-Work: An Exploration on the Rise of OnlyFans as a Space for Sexually Explicit Content

by

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Abstract

OnlyFans is a platform that has become well-known for creators selling sexually explicit content, where creators share their content with fans, often for a monthly subscription fee. Currently, little is known within an academic context about the platform and its creators of adult content. Specifically, this study sought to understand how creators experience their platform, understand their labour, and how their experiences intersect with or diverge from current understandings of sex work. To understand the lived experiences of OnlyFans creators of sexually explicit content, nine qualitative interviews and a visual content analysis of 10 creators different from those interviewed were conducted. My research illustrates how there are parallels between OnlyFans creators of sexually explicit content and other forms of sex work however, creators are experiencing sex work in new manners, particularly within a digital environment.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

OnlyFans is a platform that provides individuals with the opportunity to earn their income by taking a series of sexual photos, editing them, and uploading them to the Internet. With the advancement of technology, the manner in which sex or sexual content is produced, distributed, and consumed has been altered in ways that could be referred to as a new era of sexual labour. Nowadays, self-producing, sharing, and consuming sexually explicit content and porn is even easier than ever, with many individuals now capitalizing on this possibility.

OnlyFans is a website platform developed in 2016, that allows individuals, known as creators, to share various content with viewers, known as their fans.1 As explained in their mission statement, creators “monetize their content while developing authentic relationships with their fanbase.”2 OnlyFans also has a pay-per-view (PPV) feature for creators to charge their fans a fee to view a post by the creator, as well as a tipping feature.3 Through the monetization process, creators often provide an inside view of their life and persona to their fans for typically a monthly subscription fee, but creators also have the option of having a free account subscription.4 OnlyFans pays creators 80% of the money earned, while the platform retains the remaining 20%.5

Creators on OnlyFans develop and further their relationship with their fan base by sharing content that ranges from photos to videos to writing samples, in genres such as cooking, beauty, gaming, wellness, comedy, and adult content.6 However, OnlyFans is probably best

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2 “Our Team.”
4 “Community Guidelines.”
5 “Community Guidelines.”
known as a platform that hosts adult content. Due to the difficulties in sharing adult content on many popular social media platforms, OnlyFans allows creators to share such content while providing creators with the opportunity to earn money for making these posts, thus contributing to the popularity of the platform and the number of both creators and fans.

In the first year following the introduction of OnlyFans, the platform saw its first 1 million users. OnlyFans’ popularity has skyrocketed within the past two years, in part due to increasing interest from social media, as well as global events. In July 2019, the platform obtained its first 10 million users, and in January 2021, the platform passed 100 million users. Notably, the influx of users within this less than two-year period can be attributed to COVID-19. Many individuals lost their jobs or experienced reduced working hours due to the pandemic, with The International Labour Organization reporting that in 2020, 255 million full-time jobs were lost. Evidence suggests that individuals are using OnlyFans as an alternative to their pre-pandemic job, in an attempt to earn money in a sexual environment that is new for many individuals. Moreover, living and tuition costs are rising, and as a result of the current economic climate, evidence shows that individuals are turning to or are considering turning to OnlyFans in an attempt to alleviate costs. Due to the structure of OnlyFans, the platform fits

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7 “Our Team.”
8 “Our Team.”
within the gig economy, where creators, as independent contractors, use the platform as a supplementary or even primary source to earn income.\textsuperscript{13}

OnlyFans has become well-known on social media on applications including Twitter and Tik Tok, as well as through various news articles and pop culture references, such as by Beyoncé in the Savage remix.\textsuperscript{14} OnlyFans’ popularity can also be attributed to various controversies and how the platform handled them. For instance, in August 2020, former Disney Chanel star, Bella Thorne, joined OnlyFans and earned $1 million within her first 24 hours, and $2 million shortly after, causing creators who were on the platform prior to Thorne to be upset, as she was an already wealthy celebrity entering the space of largely non-celebrities and taking away from their potential fans and income.\textsuperscript{15} The outrage grew when Thorne promised nude photos for $200 through the PPV feature, but after subscribers did not receive the promised content, they sought a refund.\textsuperscript{16} OnlyFans then announced various changes to the website, claiming it was unrelated to Thorne, although creators suggest otherwise.\textsuperscript{17} OnlyFans placed a $100 cap on PPV messages and a $50 cap on PPV posts for creators who offer a free account.\textsuperscript{18} Both PPV options had a cap of $200 previously.\textsuperscript{19} OnlyFans also changed the tipping limit for new users to $100 but allows


\textsuperscript{14} Megan Thee Stallion and Beyoncé, “Savage (remix),” by Megan Thee Stallion, Beyoncé, and Bobby Session Jr., Recorded April 29, 2020, track 15 on Good News, 1501 Certified Entertainment, and 300 Entertainment, Spotify.


\textsuperscript{16} Kircher, “Bella Thorne Broke OnlyFans.”


\textsuperscript{19} Carman, “OnlyFans Confirms New Caps.”
increases to $200, which had previously been the standard for all users. Finally, OnlyFans changed the payout process for creators in certain countries, where these creators can only receive payouts every 21 days, rather than the previous seven days.

The popularity of OnlyFans as a space for sexually explicit content has sparked debates about whether this content is sex work. This debate largely arose a year following the Thorne incident, where OnlyFans faced another controversy. In August 2021, OnlyFans suddenly announced that it would ban sexually explicit content starting October 1, 2021. Following outrage from creators and supporters, OnlyFans reversed its decision within days by suspending the ban. CEO of the time, Tim Stokely, stated that the temporary ban was due to issues with banks, claiming that they were refusing to work with a platform that hosts sexually explicit content by not processing payments that are associated with adult content. OnlyFans later secured the necessary assurances for sexually explicit content to continue to be allowed on the platform. Other platforms have been less willing or able to host such content. For instance, Tumblr, the blogging platform that was a popular space for individuals to share sexually explicit content, banned all nudity on the platform in 2018.

OnlyFans’ legal status in relation to the House bill, Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (FOSTA) and the Senate bill, Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act (SESTA) has also led to additional controversy. FOSTA-SESTA was signed into US law in 2018, with the stated goal “to reduce human trafficking by amending Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act and

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20 Carman, “OnlyFans confirms new caps.”
21 Carman, “OnlyFans confirms new caps.”
23 Barry, “OnlyFans Suddenly Reversed.”
24 Barry, “OnlyFans Suddenly Reversed.”
holding Internet platforms accountable for the content their users post.” 26 However, the law has placed “increased pressure on Internet platforms to censor their users.” 27 FOSTA-SESTA was intended “to prevent the online exploitation of trafficked persons,” but the laws have hurt those they intended to help, which has pushed “sex workers and trafficking victims into more dangerous and exploitative situations.” 28 FOSTA-SESTA has negatively impacted sex workers who have consensually chosen this work and relied on the Internet to earn money while keeping themselves safe. 29 FOSTA-SESTA 30 has not combated trafficking, but rather, marginalized populations are pushed into increased financial insecurity and are more vulnerable to labour exploitation and trafficking. 31 Specifically, online sex workers have experienced detrimental effects such as on their safety, health outcomes, access to the community, and financial stability. 32 In 2021, Congress members have demanded an investigation by the Department of Justice for allegations of child sexual abuse materials on OnlyFans. 33 While some allege that these claims of child abuse and trafficking are unfounded, others allege that there are potential


29 Emily McCombs, “’This Bill is Killing Us’: 9 Sex Workers on Their Lives in the Wake of FOSTA,” HuffPost, May 17, 2018, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/sex-workers-sesta-fosta_n_5ad0d7d0e4b0edca2cb964d9.


32 Blunt and Wolf, 121.

cases, or even specific incidents occurring, which should warrant an investigation. Although some groups want to target OnlyFans under the guise of protecting children or stopping trafficking, previous instances of FOSTA-SESTA harming other online sex workers demonstrate that OnlyFans creators who are on the site and creating content consensually may be adversely affected.

The purpose of this study is to contribute to the dearth of research that examines OnlyFans as a platform for sexually explicit content. My research focuses on the following questions: How do the creators of sexually explicit content experience OnlyFans? How do creators of sexually explicit content understand their labour? How do sexually explicit content creators’ experiences intersect with or diverge from current understandings of sex work? I contend that the work of OnlyFans creators who create sexually explicit content is an emerging form of sex work, however, creators are borrowing, whether knowingly or not, aspects of other areas of online and offline sex work, while also experiencing sex work in new manners.

Chapter 2 outlines the existing literature on OnlyFans as a platform for adult content as well as discusses other forms of labour to situate OnlyFans as a new form of sexual labour. Specifically, I analyze forms of sexual labour that have various similarities and differences to the adult content on OnlyFans and its creators, as well as compare and connect the work to the gig economy.

In Chapter 3, I describe the methodology employed to collect and analyze the data for this study. I detail the recruitment strategies and the methods used to gather interview data from

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OnlyFans content creators who sell sexually explicit content. I then discuss the procedures used for the visual content analysis of OnlyFans creators’ profiles on Instagram. I further discuss the ethical considerations that were considered and how participants were ensured anonymity at all times of the recruitment, interview, and visual content processes.

Chapter 4 describes the theoretical frameworks that are used to understand the data. Specifically, the theories of sex-positive, sexual economics, and emotional labour will be briefly drawn on to assist in analyzing the data.

The findings from my interviews and visual analysis are discussed in chapters 5 and 6. Each analysis details the themes that emerged as I sought to understand the experiences of OnlyFans creators who sell adult content while promoting themselves off the platform and on Instagram. The themes showcase how such work is similar to, but also different from other forms of sexual labour and the gig economy.

Chapter 7 outlines concluding thoughts from this study, as well as the limitations of my study. I suggest recommendations for future research on OnlyFans as a space for sexually explicit content, in which data from future research can be compared to this study to further the insight into OnlyFans and its creators and customers.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

As OnlyFans is a relatively new internet content subscription service, little is known within an academic context about the platform, creators, and content that is shared and sold. While not all of the content on OnlyFans is sexual, some content is, which demonstrates that emerging platforms and services are hosting both sexual and non-sexual content. This further demonstrates that sex work and sexual labour is a shifting terrain which in turn, affects the manner that sex, or sexual content is sold and consumed. However, debates exist as to whether the sexually explicit content on OnlyFans is sex work or not. To situate my work on OnlyFans, I first consider the literature on related forms of labour and economies – such as offline sex work, camming, sugar dating, and gig work. An analysis of sex work literature reveals the expansion of sex work in myriad ways. For instance, with the advancement of technology, camming is now regarded as an online form of sex work. Typically offline, yet facilitated by online platforms, sugar dating literature provides insights into the non-physical and emotional elements that can exist within sexual labour. Finally, an examination of gig economy scholarship demonstrates how individuals use online labour as temporary work or to supplement existing work. Overall, these perspectives help to contextualize OnlyFans and, when placed into conversation with this study’s interviews and visual analysis, help to demonstrate how OnlyFans is understood and experienced as a new form of sex work.

OnlyFans

To date, only a few academic studies have interviewed OnlyFans creators who sell sexually explicit content. OnlyFans studies that have emerged have explored creators’

motivations for joining the platform, as well as how creators understand their bodies and conceptualize their labour.\textsuperscript{36} For instance, Vaughn Hamilton et al.’s study interviewed OnlyFans creators to understand their motivations for joining the platform.\textsuperscript{37} Researchers discovered that participants joined OnlyFans due to its visibility and acceptance in society, the potential earnings that were perceived as better than in other gig work, the desire to engage sexually in a digital manner, having existing audiences, content, or skills, and pandemic related factors including increased free time.\textsuperscript{38} Participants’ motivations for joining OnlyFans were also similar to gig workers in other forms of gig work, while also providing reasons that were preferable to these other forms of gig work, such as autonomy in creating content. In Daniel Cardoso and Cosimo Marco Scarcelli’s study, they conducted semi-structured interviews with Italian women creators between 19-24 years-old and revealed three major themes – corporeal, technical, and self-transformational – which illustrated how the participant understood their body and conceptualized their labour in relation to the gig economy.\textsuperscript{39} These themes were reflected through physical changes of outwards presentation and bodywork (corporeal), as shown through the visual and narrative aspects of the content and creator (technical), which contributed to the self-acceptance and awareness of the bodies on OnlyFans (self-transformational).\textsuperscript{40}

Through an examination of the platform and interviews with creators, other studies have also explored how creators experience the platform and how the work on OnlyFans is a form of gig work. Specifically, Aryana Safaee’s study used semi-structured interviews and examined


\textsuperscript{37} Hamilton et al., “Nudes?” 1-14.

\textsuperscript{38} Hamilton et al., 6.

\textsuperscript{39} Cardoso and Scarcelli, “(Digitized) Body,” 98–121.

\textsuperscript{40} Cardoso and Scarcelli, 107.
other published interviews with OnlyFans creators to understand how OnlyFans creators who identify as sex workers are emotionally and monetarily impacted by what Safaee argues is a new form of sex work occurring within the digital age.41 Safaee examines her participants’ experiences on the platform to situate and understand their work and the platform within the gig economy and the effects of the gig economy on creators.42 She discusses how the platform is utilizing the gig work structure for sex work, where creators experience traditional and unique benefits and challenges of gig labour, such as being your own boss while encountering challenges including privacy issues.43 Overall, the findings from her interviews illustrate how creators participate in emotional and physical labour that is often unpaid, contributing to work-life balance struggles within the gig economy of OnlyFans.44 In a study by Jirassaya Uttarapong et al., researchers conducted interviews with OnlyFans creators who sell adult content to understand how they obtain resources to aid in making decisions and managing their OnlyFans business and experience online collaboration and social support through other OnlyFans creators.45 Researchers referred to instrumental support to illustrate how creators in their study use social support networks such as Discord, Reddit, or Twitter, for content creation, promotion collaboration, management, and protection assistance.46 Researchers also referred to informational support to showcase how creators use creator networks for sharing, soliciting, and obtaining advice from one another.47 The study demonstrates how OnlyFans creators rely on

42 Safaee, 1-97.
43 Safaee, 2-64
44 Safaee, 77.
46 Uttarapong et al., 3-4.
47 Uttarapong et al., 4.
instrumental and informational work to navigate the gig economy and precarious labour market.\textsuperscript{48}

Research on OnlyFans has begun to explore the platform and the content creators who sell adult content in relation to sex work.\textsuperscript{49} Sophie Sanchez’s article examines OnlyFans as a space for sex work, and why individuals turn to sex work, specifically sex work in digital space.\textsuperscript{50} Sanchez discusses the impact of the pandemic on sex work and how in-person sex workers have turned to OnlyFans.\textsuperscript{51} Finally, she discusses the impact of celebrities on OnlyFans and raises questions about whether celebrities on OnlyFans harm or support sex workers, to where OnlyFans should be for non-celebrities.\textsuperscript{52} Tori Rodriguez’s master’s thesis examines the experiences of OnlyFans creators on the platform and conventional social media to learn how understandings of sex work may be altering due to the popularity of OnlyFans.\textsuperscript{53} The interviews from 30 OnlyFans creators revealed, among many themes, “sex worker” as an identity, the acceptance of OnlyFans, “whorearchy,” and the role of social media in generating content and fans.\textsuperscript{54} Rodriguez’s research demonstrates that while OnlyFans creators experience similar but also new ways of engaging in sex work, such as stigma and the reliance on other social media platforms, sex work is becoming more accepted in society, as OnlyFans and its content has become more familiar within the sex industry.\textsuperscript{55} While the studies varied in their objectives, they

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\textsuperscript{48} Uttarapong et al., 5.
\textsuperscript{50} Sanchez, “World’s Oldest Profession,” 4-8.
\textsuperscript{51} Sanchez, 7-8.
\textsuperscript{52} Sanchez, 8-11.
\textsuperscript{53} Rodriguez, “Taboo to Trendy,” 1-95.
\textsuperscript{54} Rodriguez, 29-59.
\textsuperscript{55} Rodriguez, 29-75.
\end{flushleft}
provided insight into OnlyFans creators of sexually explicit content and how they experience sex work in a digital environment. However, Internet based-sex work such as camming is not new, and it provides similar aspects to OnlyFans of creation and consumption of sexual content at home. The above research on OnlyFans demonstrates how technology may be making sex work more accessible and as a form of gig work, which allows creators to engage in emerging forms of sex work and gig work in the privacy of their homes.

While the findings from the researchers differed, a common theme regarding OnlyFans as sex work emerged, leading to debates as to whether OnlyFans is sex work or not. For instance, in Cardoso and Scarcelli’s, Safaee’s, and Rodriguez’s studies, not all of the participants identified as sex workers, due to the variation of sexual content that some creators post, a lack of sexual acts in the content, or OnlyFans being a supplementary source of income. Conversely, creators have identified their work as sex work due to the type of content that is shared and the exchange of sexual content and desire for money. In light of these debates, the literature on sex work discussed below serves to illustrate how OnlyFans maintains similar components to traditional and “indirect” understandings of sex work.

Sex Work

Sex work, also sometimes referred to as prostitution, is deemed as “sexual services for money or its equivalent.” According to C Harcourt and B Donovan, sex work is broadly grouped into two forms based on the interaction involved in the exchange: direct (street-based, 

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57 Rodriguez, 37-38.
59 Throughout the thesis, the term “sex work” is used to describe a transaction involving sexual acts in exchange for a benefit. The use of this term involves an acknowledgment that sex work is viewed as a legitimate form of labour by those working in the industry and sex work activists. In contrast, the terms “prostitute” or “prostitution” are used only when an article that is cited describes a similar transaction.
escort, brothel) and indirect (lap dancing, swingers club, massage parlour). With the advancement of technology, indirect sex work can be offered in digital and internet-based manners. Numerous studies have explored the reasons for entering the sex work industry, noting financial needs/wants, negative life social circumstances, traditional family activity/peer influence, force, autonomous decision making, flexible/less working hours, and higher pay compared to other jobs. Despite the benefits, sex workers are at disproportionate risk of experiencing health challenges, violence, discrimination, harassment, and strong social stigma.

With the expansion of digital commerce and the Internet, the understanding and operation of selling sexual services has been altered. Online sex work can be defined “as the Internet-mediated exchange of sexual commodities and/or services.” Angela Jones, a prominent sex work scholar, has explored digital sex work to showcase how sex work has been reshaped due to the Internet, in which the Internet has assisted in offering new manners for sex workers to operate their business and offer their services. Technology and the Internet have transformed and altered the services that sex workers are able to offer, the manner that sex workers can interact with other sex workers, and the manner that individuals are able to consume the

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60 Harcourt and Donovan, “Faces of Sex Work,” 201-03.
services. The Internet can be used to deliver a sexual service, or it can be used to market sexual services to be delivered in a physical space. Online sex work offers greater work control, enhanced safety and screening measures, the ability to implement protective strategies, and reduced stigma. Due to the heightened risks of street-based sex work, workers favour online solicitation for finalizing arrangements, while protecting themselves.

Elena Argento et al.’s study examined the experiences of male sex workers in Vancouver who have transitioned from street-based to online solicitation, largely due to losing a popular area for outdoor sex work. The study noted that whereas online workers have the ability to easily reach a broader audience due to the wide range of websites, thus increasing their overall income, online services also increased competition amongst workers, making offline workers consider other approaches for advertising and creating additional and often riskier services for clients. A study conducted by Scott Cunningham and Todd D. Kendall examined online prostitution and its effects on sellers, finding that online sexual activities offer new benefits and reduced risks to attract individuals to market their services online, with online solicitation displacing street-based sex workers in their 30s and 40s, but likely increasing the market in other age groups.

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66 Sanders et al., *Internet Sex Work*, 50.
71 Argento et al., 1998-99.
Online technology and environments have “further enabled sex workers to organize, support each other share information about marketing, safety, rights and a wide range of work-related matters.” Online forums also allow sex workers to obtain advice and practical information about various work matters, generating a sense of community and even friendships. The Internet has increased the amount of time that sex workers spend managing and marketing their work, as workers spend a significant amount of time communicating in chat rooms or online environments, however, these hours could also contribute to increased job satisfaction. In Sanders et al.’s study, “nearly two-thirds of survey respondents… tended to or strongly agreed that they would not do sex work without the Internet,” where other studies support this finding that the Internet made selling sex possible.

The literature on sex work serves to illustrate how OnlyFans maintains similar components to traditional understandings of sex work. Sex work literature demonstrates how the experiences of OnlyFans creators of sexually explicit content fit the traditional definition of sex work while showing how sex workers experience their work and clients. However, the existing understandings of sex work do not fully encapsulate the lived experiences of OnlyFans creators, as their work is different in many ways from traditional forms of sex work, as well as other digital forms of sex work. Through an examination of additional forms of work, it will become evident how there are parallels between existing labour and OnlyFans.

73 Sanders et al., Internet Sex Work, 40.
74 Sanders et al., 42.
Camming

While sex work is often associated with physical, in-person communication and actions, the advent of the Internet and other technologies has allowed sex work to take digital forms. Camming, an industry that has gained significant prominence within the past decade, originally emerged in 1996, where models use web cameras (cams) to sell “interactive computer-mediated sex online.” Several authors have explored the work of adult webcamming and how cam models experience various web camming platforms such as in articles by Kavita Nayar, Angela Jones, and Ionela Vlase and Ana Maria Preotessa. Interviews with cam models, observational methods, and camming web forum analysis reveals that camming offers non-monetary benefits as well, such as cammers becoming more comfortable with their body, gaining sexual pleasure through their work, granting workers agency, and developing intimate relationships with clients.

Robert L. Reece explained how camming offers black women the opportunity to evade barriers and challenges that they might face within traditional porn, such as subpar treatment due

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to racism, inconsistent and low pay, and a requirement to perform degrading sexual scenes.\textsuperscript{80} Moreover, transgender individuals describe camming as an accepting environment that allows one to discover themselves, with platforms such as Chaturbate having a reputation for inclusivity of its performers.\textsuperscript{81} While camming offers heavily stigmatized and discriminated groups additional benefits that other forms of sex work may not be able to provide, camming comes with downsides, including more emotional and psychological (rather than physical) effects stemming from concerns and experiences with viewers recording their shows and uploading them on pornographic websites, doxing, harassment, stalking, hostility, and trolling.\textsuperscript{82} Overall, many cam models have argued that camming is a safer form of sexual labour compared to in-person sex work.\textsuperscript{83} In examining Romanian women’s experiences as webcam models, Vlase and Preoteasa propose the concept of “flexi(nse)curity” to illustrate the flexibility and (in)security that such women experience between their work arrangements (home and webcam studio) and lived insecurities.\textsuperscript{84}

Although much of the research focuses on the cam models’ perspectives, research is emerging into the customer’s perspectives and specifically, the appeals of this type of content to the consumer. Amateur pornography and alt porn have become increasingly popular within the online pornography context, transforming how pornography is produced and consumed.\textsuperscript{85} Kavita

\textsuperscript{83} Madeline V. Henry, “‘You Can Look But You Can’t Touch’: Women’s Experiences of Webcam Sex Work in Aotearoa/New Zealand” (master's thesis, Auckland University of Technology, 2018), 131.
\textsuperscript{84} Vlase and Preoteasa, “Flexi(nse)curity in Adult Webcamming,” 605.
Nayar, and Pierre Brasseur and Jean Finez have noted how cam models capitalize on the amateurism component within their digital sexual work, while also guaranteeing a level of authenticity and intimacy between themselves and their customers. Cam models and camming platforms take advantage of the amateur nature that is emphasized within this work as a method to differentiate the work from other types of sex work, such as classic pornography which uses professional actors.

According to Jones, consumers of camming content appreciate how they can get to know the cam model, consume the content and experience pleasure in the privacy of their homes, and experiences a degree of anonymity that avoids the stigma associated with sex work consumers. Brasseur and Finez further explain how consumers want to talk and be heard, so they seek an intimate connection with the cam models. The relationship between cam models and customers often resembles a friendship or even turns into true friendships, through the sharing and discussions of the cam models’ life with their customers, thus furthering the intimate connection and social interaction that many customers seek. While many of these aspects can be experienced in other forms of in-person sex work, these aspects and the engagement between the seller and customer are being experienced in a virtual, real-time manner.

Research demonstrates that camming is a growing sex work option for students, as it is viewed as a quick and conducive method for students to earn a sufficient income for school and personal expenses, for paying off or even avoiding student loans, and balancing work and

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87 Brasseur and Finez, “Performing Amateurism,” 16.
89 Brasseur and Finez, “Performing Amateurism,” 23.
90 Patella-Rey, “Sex Cam Modeling,” 58-64.
academic life.92 Students also choose to cam depending on the area that they are living, which affects the legality of sex work options.93 In the past, students who have engaged in sex work have been expelled or have had to leave the university, despite the forms being legal.94 Due to the stigma that is associated with sex work, many students opt not to disclose their job as an adult webcammer, for fears of suffering from detrimental consequences, such as risking future prospects or their academic career or avoiding disciplinary action.95 Although less common, students may choose to disclose their work as a cam model to their peers, as a method of control, to educate others, and to challenge negative perceptions and assumptions.96 The growing phenomenon of camming has been documented internationally, including in the United States, Canada, Australia, Russia, Colombia, Romania, and the United Kingdom.97

As camming and OnlyFans take place in an online environment, there are several similarities between these forms of sexual labour. For instance, communicating with fans online often for the purposes of monetary gain in exchange for sexual content, and through pay-per-view features on OnlyFans which are similar to private cam shows. Additionally, OnlyFans creators have the option of livestreaming, where they can perform similar acts as on camming.

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94 Simpson and Smith, 479.


platforms or engage with customers in a real-time format. In many ways, OnlyFans can be viewed as an extension of camming through these similar features. Since camming involves the Internet and does not require workers to interact in-person with customers, the literature on camming assists in demonstrating how OnlyFans can be understood as a form of sex work, despite existing solely online. Yet, as the data analysis reveals below, there are also potential differences.

Sugar Dating

Sugar dating is a growing phenomenon that is similarly furthering current understandings of commercial sexual relationships. Sugar relationships involve a ‘sugar baby’ who requests financial or material compensation from their ‘sugar daddy’ or ‘sugar mama,’ in exchange for sexual intimacy and companionship. Although both sugar daddy and sugar mama relationships seek an exchange with a sugar baby that involves an allowance, sugar daddy and female baby relationships typically have sex as a priority, whereas sugar mama and male baby relationships typically focus on forming a nurturing relationship where sex could eventually occur. Here too, debates exist about whether sugaring is sex work and if so, how it overlaps and is distinguishable from more traditional direct and indirect types of sex work. For instance, Kavita Nayar explains that sugar relationships contain an emotional and intimate component that is distinct from sex work and traditional casual dating due to the transactional element involved, a claim that Elizabeth Bernstein, who discusses the “girlfriend experience” (GFE) as a form of sex work,

contradicts. Bernstein explains that the GFE contains sexual and romantic relationship aspects, where both the client and sex worker may provide or receive these aspects through the emotional and physical labour involved.

Whether the sugar relationship is sex work or not is the subject of much scholarly debate. While sugar dating websites “are ‘dating sites’ that promote longer-term relationships,” the requests for typically monetary allowances in exchange for sexual interactions blur the lines between dating and sex work. In most relationships, sugar daddies or sugar mamas expect sexual interactions with the sugar baby in exchange for money, gifts, or other desires of the sugar baby. Sugar babies often seek and request a discreet relationship to not risk future job prospects and to prevent family or friends from finding out about the arrangement, thus suggesting that an association with stigmatized sex work does indeed exist. Sugar dating has been argued to be illegal as it is a form of prostitution and that sugar relationships combine dating and escort services. Scull discusses the intersection between sugar dating and prostitution as that of “sugar prostitution,” as this form focuses on “sugary” elements, including lingerie or gifts, wherein money is exchanged following sexual activity that is always present

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103 Motyl, “Trading Sex,” 929.
within the relationship. However, Scull also argues that the majority of sugar relationships are distinct from prostitution, due to a lack of sex sometimes and through the scripts that dictate how the relationship is operated, such as through interpersonal scripts. Some sugar babies have admitted that they viewed their sugar relationship as prostitution, but other sugar babies were less inclined, a sentiment that also emerges in the interviews with OnlyFans content creators, as is discussed below. Alternatively, Ummni Khan suggests that heterosexual marriages could constitute as a form of sex work, in which her suggestion further blurs the line between sex work and other forms of work that are not traditionally considered sex work. Nevertheless, these varying arguments of exchange within relationships contribute to the discussions of how sugar dating may or may not be situated within sex work.

In distinguishing sugar relationships from prostitution, sugar babies emphasize the emotional connection with the benefactor and the creation of a genuine relationship, while diminishing the emphasis on demands, needs, or expectations of money. Scull suggests that both sugaring and prostitution may provide benefactors with the GFE, due to the similarities between the two concepts. The digital sex work environment allows for a girlfriend or boyfriend experience to be obtained through subscription messaging, such as on OnlyFans, where creators can converse with their fans and offer them the girlfriend or boyfriend experience.

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in a digital manner. Nayar explains how focusing on the expectations of pleasure and affection assists in framing the arrangement as a relationship, rather than a service. Some sugar babies have further explained that sugar relationships are “based on wants not needs; gifts not money, and a relationship and not a one off interaction.” Sugar daddies reference the physical attractiveness of sugar babies in distinguishing them from sex workers. While there are differences between sugar dating and traditional forms of sex work, the difficulties and debates in defining sugar dating as sex work or not remain.

Research on sugar dating has also explored students’ involvement with these arrangements, and their motivations for joining. Students report turning to sugar dating largely to earn money for tuition and other expenses, wherein “a leading sugar arrangement website identifies two-fifths of its registered members as students.” Beyond financial reasons, one may become a sugar baby or enter a compensated dating relationship, whether a student or not, to obtain materialistic items, the need to be desired by another person, a need for companionship, friendship, career opportunities, validation, sex, intimacy, and love.

114 Nayar, “Sweetening the deal.”
Studies are emerging on the motives of why one becomes a sugar daddy. Sugar daddies desire to be the male benefactor to have fun and escape their everyday lives while seeking adventure, companionship, validation and confidence, mentorship, intimacy, status, sex, and love.\textsuperscript{120} Mia DeSoto analyzed sugar daddy profiles from SeekingArrangement.com and discovered that sugar daddies often seek a friends with benefits or no strings attached relationship, and an emotional connection.\textsuperscript{121} From the perspective of sugar babies, they reasoned that sugar daddies seek an arrangement for the desire for younger women, companionship, sex, social capital, control, and power, and as an escape/outlet.\textsuperscript{122}

Individuals seeking a sugar relationship immediately and explicitly negotiate their arrangement and expectations.\textsuperscript{123} According to Upadhyay, sugar daddies appear firm with their negotiations due to their economic power in the arrangement.\textsuperscript{124} Conversely, sugar babies negotiate their terms based on their monetary and life needs.\textsuperscript{125} As sugar babies hold the economic power in the relationship, they use their negotiating power to add requests to the exchange or turn down sugar daddies’ requests or even walk away from the arrangement.\textsuperscript{126}


Research on sugar dating reveals the intense aspect of emotional labour that is involved in sugar arrangements, due to the requirements of the relationship and the need to meet the benefactor’s desires. This literature is useful for helping to situate the emotional labour of OnlyFans creators, although in an online capacity, and to inform debates about the relationship of OnlyFans to sex work.

Gig Work

A final set of research that helps to contextualize my analysis of OnlyFans is literature on the gig economy – a growing type of work that is transforming our understanding of labour and of labour relations. Gig work can be defined as “platform-based ‘gig’ employment, which uses digital technology to mediate the process of commissioning, supervision, delivery and compensation of work performed by workers on a contingent, piece-work basis.”127 Following the 2008 Financial Crisis, gig work emerged as a new form of independent work.128 Common gig work jobs include rideshare services (Uber), or food delivery services (DoorDash), but gig work also includes at-home work, such as editing and writing services.129 Specifically, “workers will support themselves as flexible, free independent suppliers, moving seamlessly from one job (or ‘gig’) to another, utilising digital technology to connect with purchasers of their services.”130 Unlike most traditional labour contexts, gig work is regarded as temporary and flexible work that involves compensation that is project-to-project based.131 Compared to other types of gig work

where the contractor for the company is ordered to fulfil requests, OnlyFans creators have the freedom, under the guidelines and terms of service, to create content to share and sell. However, creators are left to attract their customers and maintain their services, which is different than other typical forms of gig work where the worker can choose the customer, such as in food delivery. Furthermore, creators must use their own expenses to buy props, equipment, or other production expenses as needed.

Numerous studies indicate the primary reasons for entering gig work, such as workers controlling their work schedules, the ability to work from home or choosing where to work, and increased worker autonomy. However, many gig workers are not afforded job security, do not receive benefits, rights to sick or holiday pay, are not guaranteed a minimum wage or set number of hours, receive no protection from harassment and discrimination, are not always able to readily and easily find gigs when desired, and experience exhaustion due to overworking and unsocial working hours.

With the emergence of digital platforms, gig work has expanded. Digital platforms that support gig work allow individuals to assume multiple gigs with ease, in which they can sometimes be undertaken simultaneously, or individuals may supplement another source of income with gig work. Skill level, workers’ autonomy, and power shape gig work and workers’

133 Safaee, 29.
134 Safaee, 56.
A notable aspect of the expansion of gig work is unpaid emotional labour, as gig workers experience heightened pressure to maintain high ratings with clients in order to continue to work. Wood et al.’s study interviewed over 100 gig workers from various countries to examine how they experience and understand their gig work through online labour platforms. The study noted the intensity of the worker-client relationship, “with 80% of respondents reporting that the pace of their work was determined by direct demands from clients.” In many ways, “the client assumes the informal position of one’s boss,” wherein gig workers have various employers, and bosses determine the ratings of the worker and thus their job continuation. Similarly, Watson et al. note that when gig workers are economically dependent on their job, they may be entering this work less by choice, in which the demand aspects contribute to negative work outcomes, some of which can be seen in the downsides to gig work.

Online sex work options are beginning to be situated within the gig economy. It is important to understand how OnlyFans constitutes a realm of the gig economy, particularly due to its online features and the accessibility it offers to individuals who join the platform to share and sell content. The existing literature on the gig economy in relation to OnlyFans serves to further the understandings of my interviews and participants’ experiences with the platform and their work. The gig work literature can assist in illustrating how gig work may support content

139 Wood et al., “Good Gig, Bad Gig,” 56-75.
140 Wood et al., 66.
142 Watson et al., “Gig Picture,” 354.
creation through the development of digital platforms that allows content creators of sexual content to capitalize on the technology and monetize their content.

As emotional labour is present across sex work, camming, sugar dating, and gig economies, there remains a distinction between these forms of labour. The manner that the workers experience their emotional labour to generate an income is different, depending on how they are required to interact with the customer and the needs and desires of the customer. For instance, within sex work, camming, and sugar dating, workers must typically appeal to the customer’s needs and converse with them to get to know them and their desires. Contrarily, within many forms of gig work, workers spend limited or zero face-to-face interactions with customers, and when they are face-to-face, conversing with them is different and typically very brief compared to within sex work and sexual labour.
Chapter 3: Methodology

This section discusses a mixed-method approach to studying OnlyFans and to better understand how its users experienced the platform and described the labour they performed. This study employed three key methods. This study’s key method involved 10 qualitative interviews with OnlyFans content creators who sell sexually explicit content. Via these questions, I sought to gain an understanding of North American, 18+ year-old OnlyFans creators and their content, while learning about their motives for joining the platform and their opinions and perceptions of their work. I also sought to understand their experiences with the platform and their fans and how the platform has affected their lives and their views on their work. Qualitative interviews have been used in other studies on sexual labour to help better understand sex work from the perspectives of those in the profession.\textsuperscript{144} Individuals engaged in sexual labour often experience stigma, prejudice, discrimination, and marginalization, due to the public disapproval associated with this type of work.\textsuperscript{145} Interviews allow creators to share their lived experiences to present accurate information on themselves and their work, particularly since there are limited academic interviews with OnlyFans creators who share this type of content.

Prior to the interviews, I requested that my interviewees complete a pre-interview survey containing demographic and context questions, similar to the survey used in an earlier study on camming by Angela Jones.\textsuperscript{146} Surveys were used to ask participants basic demographic and background questions, with the goal to provide context on their identities and experiences as a


\textsuperscript{146} Jones, “Pleasures of Fetishization,” 279-98.
creator prior to the interview, to support my understanding of their responses to the interview questions.

Lastly, I conducted a visual content analysis of 10 Instagram accounts of different OnlyFans creators who post sexually suggestive content to promote their OnlyFans accounts. As there is limited academic research on OnlyFans creators, a visual content analysis of their public online presentations was used to develop a better understanding of how creators interact, present, and promote themselves to viewers or fans, off of the OnlyFans platform and through their social media content. This method drew from previous studies’ analyses of pornographic videos of actors’ physical and verbal actions, actors’ descriptive characteristics, and sexual acts and behaviours of the videos.147 These studies examined the appearance and portrayal of the actors to understand their behaviour and the meaning behind their actions.148 Instagram has been described as “a valuable resource for understanding the practices, self-disclosed lived experiences, and aspirational identities of subpopulations on Instagram,” where the platform’s use of text and hashtags supports the highly visual culture of the platform and the intended meaning of the shared posts.149 A visual analysis of OnlyFans creators’ Instagram content, such as aspects of the posts and account, provides greater insight into how the role of other social media forms contributes to the success of their OnlyFans account. Moreover, the analysis offers insight into how OnlyFans creators are able to appeal to a wider audience by promoting their

accounts on another form of social media. From the visual analysis, I sought to understand how creators use other forms of social media to assist in running their account, and how their labour is similar to or differs from other manners that sex workers use to promote themselves and their work.

**Ethical Considerations**

As my research involves human participants, obtaining ethics is required to ensure that the rights of my participants are protected. Sexual labour is a contentious area of research, and individuals within this area of work often experience significant levels of stigma. Due to the nature of the research topic, the importance of ethics and engaging with participants ethically is heightened. To conduct the interviews, ethics clearance from the Carleton University Research Ethics Board (REB) was required. To obtain ethics clearance, I was required to provide protocol forms, recruitment documents, and interview questions. The REB raised various ethical considerations, including concerns regarding the safety and privacy of participants, the security of the direct messaging on Twitter and Instagram, and how to ensure the protection of potential and confirmed participants. As the security of communication is paramount to ensure the safety of participants and to minimize risks, I only logged into my accounts on my personal password-protected devices. I also added my Twitter, Instagram, and email accounts to the phone application, Microsoft Authenticator, which requires a two-step verification process to log in to these accounts.

Anonymization is an integral element of qualitative research, particularly when sensitive and personal topics with potential social, economic, and psychological harms are being discussed. For instance, it was conceivable that OnlyFans creators could be concerned about being outed as an OnlyFans creator by friends, family, or employers. To ensure their
confidentiality while strengthening their safety, anonymization was crucial to protect the participants and third parties. Anonymization is a complex and ongoing process, which seeks to protect the identities of participants while maintaining the integrity and value of the data. Often key to anonymization is the use of a pseudonym to ensure that participants cannot be identified from the data collected. Anonymization is particularly relevant in studies involving risks and stigma associated with sex work and motivations for engaging in sexual services. Researchers have discussed how in many countries, sex work has been criminalized, and due to this, in addition to the stigmatization that many sex workers experience, pseudonyms afford a degree of protection against state governance. Each participant was therefore assigned a pseudonym to ensure that the participant would not create a pseudonym that would reflect them in any manner. Additionally, by assigning them a pseudonym, participants were prevented from choosing the same name, which has been discussed as a possible issue if participants are given this ability.

Also of concern to me was the voluntariness and potential vulnerability of my participants. As creators of digital sexual content, OnlyFans creators are arguably marginalized,

stigmatized, and may be subject to criminalization. Individuals may feel compelled to participate as they may feel obligated to attempt to reduce the stigma of themselves and their work. A study by Elizabeth Reed et al. discusses the factors that influence the voluntariness and motivation of participation of female sex workers in India regarding HIV research.\(^{155}\) The researchers found that while most female sex workers voluntarily participated in previous studies, some women felt obligated to participate due to social and financial pressures, coercion by other female sex workers, the desire to contribute to positive community change, and not wanting to disappoint researchers.\(^{156}\) Whether or not the individuals interviewed in this research identified as female and/or a sex worker, there are similarities between them and Reed et al.’s participants. To mitigate the risks of further marginalization or stigmatization, I explained to participants that they had the ability to opt-out at any time during the study and up to the specified date in the email invitation and consent forms [see Appendix F, G, H, and I], with no repercussion or questions asked. As well, Reed et al. noted that when participating, “verbal consent may lessen such misunderstandings” and therefore, oral consent is also an option for participants if they prefer oral instead of written consent [see Appendix H].\(^{157}\)

### Recruitment of Interviewees

As there are numerous types of content that creators sell on OnlyFans, not all of the content and creators were well situated to address my research questions. In selecting the participants to be interviewed, I used maximum variation sampling within purposive sampling. Maximum variation sampling “involves purposefully selecting persons (or settings) with a wide

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156 Reed et al., “Illusion of Voluntariness,” 915.
157 Reed et al., 916.
range of variation on dimensions of interest."¹⁵⁸ Purposive sampling occurs when individuals are intentionally selected “based on their ability to elucidate a specific theme, concept, or phenomenon.”¹⁵⁹

Two social media sites were used to recruit OnlyFans creators who promote and sell sexually explicit content—Twitter and Instagram. These platforms are popular spaces for social media influencers and OnlyFans content creators to share aspects of their lives with their followers and individuals who come across their accounts. Furthermore, both of these platforms offer easy search features as opposed to OnlyFans, which does not offer a search engine to help locate creators of a certain genre. While some creators may appear by default on the OnlyFans homepage, it is too costly and too time-consuming to find creators on the site and to look through the accounts for creators.

On Twitter and Instagram, keywords and hashtags related to OnlyFans were used in the search to find creators: “OnlyFans,” “OnlyFansofficial,” and “contentcreator.” I searched through the photos, videos, and tweets that used these keywords or hashtags to find posts and users that share sexually suggestive content to promote their OnlyFans account. With respect to participants’ experience with the OnlyFans platform, I selected participants who had been a creator for at least six months, as I believed that this would have allowed creators to have enough time to explore and understand the platform while beginning to establish a presence on the platform.

On Instagram, due to the enforcement of their community guidelines, it is more difficult for creators to share explicit content, and for this reason, I looked for content that was more

sexually suggestive than sexually explicit. Throughout the process of finding creators, Instagram began removing recent or top posts that included certain hashtags such as #OnlyFans, as the content was deemed as going against the community guidelines due to its association with the hashtag, even if it did not contain sexually suggestive or explicit content. As such, when using Instagram on a desktop, only a limited number of posts were shown under the OnlyFans hashtag, with posts often appearing that were days old rather than the top or recent posts. While more posts were shown when viewing the posts under the OnlyFans hashtag on the smartphone application, again, no recent or top posts were displayed. This change to the hashtag created challenges when finding creators, as a controlled number of posts were shown, with many of the posts not containing suggestive content.

Based on available images, I randomly selected accounts to see whether other posts shared sexual content and mentioned that they were an OnlyFans creator or linked their OnlyFans account. In some cases, accounts merely shared photos of OnlyFans creators, influencers, or models, and tagged these creators. I used these promotion accounts to find potential participants, adding their names and the platform I found them on to a list of potential participants. If creators listed their location as outside of North America, I did not add them to the list. While the creator could be lying about their location for various economic, political, and personal reasons, I worked from the presumption that they would change their city and not continent location. However, I could be incorrect with this presumption and could be missing out on messaging potential creators that are in North America. Some creators put their location as a

161 Recent posts are posts that appear in the order that they were posted, while top posts show popular posts.
phrase or sexual innuendo to further appeal to the sexual desires of their fans. Despite the location not being a legitimate location, I still added them to the list.

If a user shared sexually suggestive content and used the above hashtags, but there was no mention of them having an OnlyFans account or a link to their account, I did not add them to the list. When a post was shared that had no sexually suggestive content but mentioned OnlyFans, the majority of the time, the user was using the hashtag to reach a wider and more popular audience to generate more attention to their account and post. Further, when viewing the users’ accounts, if I noticed that there were few posts and if the dates of the posts were relatively recent, I did not add them to the list, as they would not meet one of the interview requirements of being a creator for at least six months. I did consider that the account could be new because of Instagram or Twitter deleting or suspending their previous account due to violations, however, I noticed that the creators that experienced this would include in their bio that the account is new due to the deletion or suspension of their old account. If an account appeared new but the bio stated that their last account was deleted or suspended, they were added to my list of potential participants.

Upon developing a list of suitable participants, I chose to privately message each user individually from my personal social media account or emailed them directly if an email address was provided. The recruitment script is short, as I did not want it to be overlooked or interpreted as spam, which has been noted as issues when sending digital invitations [see Appendix B for social media recruitment script]. Depending on the social media platform, one can follow another user and view their posts. In some cases, approval is needed to allow the individual to

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view the content, such as when the user chooses for their social media account to be “private.” On Facebook, a friend request is sent to connect with a fellow user, in which a Facebook friend request “implies a loose-tie relationship, often including associates or acquaintances.”\textsuperscript{163} This loose-tie relationship may be implied on other applications, such as Instagram or Twitter, when the user must accept or approve a connection request if their account is private to view the posts. Therefore, when approaching potential participants, I did not connect with them on social media by “friending” or following them. I only sought public accounts to not give a potential participant the impression that I was seeking a close and private relationship by requesting to follow them.

To inform potential participants about my research, I posted a tweet about my study on Twitter and posted details about my study on my Instagram story. Both posts included the aims, specific details, and eligibility requirements [see Appendix C for post details]. On Twitter, I pinned the tweet to my profile, so that as the top tweet on my profile, it would be immediately visible to other users that came across my profile. On Instagram, I saved the story to my profile so that users could look back at the post.

I did not create a new account for research, as there would have been minimal to no posts or followers, thus giving the appearance of a bot or spam account. A researcher “should present an accurate portrayal of their identity” when using social media sites for research.”\textsuperscript{164} As I wanted to convey my genuine self and interest in their content and work as a creator, I used my personal social media account that was set to public, so that they could view my posts, tweets,

\textsuperscript{164} Moreno et al., “Social Media Research,” 712.
followers, and followings. I believed that using my personal account would allow them to verify who I claimed to be, in which I hoped this would want them to open and respond to my message.

If the user did not open the message or respond to the message or email, I did not send a follow-up message as I did not want to annoy or pressure any participants. As well, on Instagram, only 20 messages could be sent each hour and I did not want to message more than 40 creators each day to prevent myself from appearing as a spam account. Further, I feared that unintended consequences could arise if I continued to message creators that had not responded to my original message. Such consequences include creators posting or sharing with other creators my behaviour as a researcher, in which these potential negative comments could deter other creators from wanting to participate in my study. Additionally, creators could report my accounts to the platforms for spam, being disrespectful, or targeted harassment, and these reports could result in bans or suspensions, which would halt the recruitment process.

If creators stated in their bio to only email for business inquiries, I did not email them. I did, however, direct messaged them if they had this feature. Some creators did not have the direct messaging feature on and did not have an email provided; in these cases, I moved on to the next creator to contact. As well, some creators also stated “no dm’s,” which meant that they would not read or reply to any direct messages, or they stated that you must pay them a certain amount of money to message them and in these cases, I did not message them. I followed the creators’ conditions as I wanted to respect all creators at all parts of the research process. If the creator was interested in being interviewed, I emailed them the research invitation and the consent forms, as documents and pdfs cannot be sent through direct messages. I sent a follow-up email to only those participants who said they were still interested after receiving the email invitation and the consent forms.
In addition to the social media recruitment process, snowball sampling was also used. Snowball sampling occurs when existing participants recruit potential future participants from amongst their acquaintances.\textsuperscript{165} This method is often used to recruit hard-to-reach populations, but also the everyday, mundane, and mainstream.\textsuperscript{166}

Snowball sampling offers benefits for researchers, including its flexibility and ability to access hard-to-reach participants.\textsuperscript{167} However, the method faces limitations, such as its inability to obtain random samples, as participants will be recruiting their acquaintances, which may lead to the questioning of the representativeness of the samples.\textsuperscript{168} After informing a friend about my study, they asked one of their friends who was a creator if they would be interested in participating in my study, and they provided them with my contact information. The individual voluntarily emailed me, and I sent them the email invitation and consent forms. After each interview, I asked each creator to briefly share my study intention and my contact information with fellow creators, however, no creators reached out to me from the creators that I had interviewed. Nonetheless, snowball sampling still proved to be useful through the one creator that was obtained with this method, as the creator offered insightful information and their experiences contributed to the overall understanding of OnlyFans creators and digital sexual labour.

Once an interview was scheduled, I sent the participant a link to complete an online pre-study qualitative survey consisting of 16 open-ended questions [see Appendix D]. The pre-study survey also helped to reduce the time spent in the interview. I also wanted the participants to


\textsuperscript{167} Geddes, Parker, and Scott., 348.

\textsuperscript{168} Geddes, Parker, and Scott., 348.
become more comfortable with discussing their personal experiences, and by providing a pre-
study survey, they were introduced to the idea of sharing such experiences within an academic
setting.

Online surveys are time efficient to complete and collect data and they are easy to
quickly distribute, which is beneficial for participants that are geographically dispersed.\textsuperscript{169} Further, surveys are cost-efficient or even free to conduct.\textsuperscript{170} Surveys, specifically online
surveys, are ideal for sensitive topics, as they provide privacy and anonymity to the
participants.\textsuperscript{171} However, online surveys require access to a computer or cell phone and skills,
and it may be difficult or impossible to send reminders, follow-up surveys, or data collection
messages.\textsuperscript{172} To ensure the privacy of the participant, each participant received a unique link to
the survey that was listed as their pseudonym. After they completed the questions, I recorded
their answers in a password-protected file and immediately deleted the survey.

The semi-structured interviews were structured to be mainly informal but guided, as I
wanted participants to discuss their experiences in a relaxed environment, while also answering
my research questions. As there is limited academic research on OnlyFans, I felt that having
semi-structured interviews could provide me with the greatest responses to help answer my
research questions, while also allowing participants to add additional information regarding their
experiences as a creator. Similarly, the qualitative interview structure is consistent with other
studies related to the interaction of sex work or the sale of sexual content and services within the

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Braun and Clarke, \textit{Textual Data Collection}, 137.
\item Braun and Clarke, 136-37.
\item Braun and Clarke, 136.
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\end{footnotesize}
online sphere, such as studies conducted by Andrew McLean, Rosie Campbell et al., and Stewart Cunningham et al.\textsuperscript{173}

The qualitative interviews consisted of 12 questions with each interview lasting between 20-90 minutes [see Appendix E for interview guide]. As the interviews were semi-structured, this provided me with the opportunity to ask follow-up questions or new questions to elucidate participants’ answers. Due to the number of questions in the interview guide and the ability to ask questions organically, it was initially expected that the interviews would occur for 60-90 minutes, as identified in the study invitation and consent form. However, depending on the experiences of the creator or the length of time that the creator had been an OnlyFans creator, some interviews went much under the expected minimum time, even when new and follow-up questions were asked. To date, only a few academic studies have interviewed OnlyFans creators who sell sexually explicit content. As such, the questions were developed to generate answers that would allow participants to speak to these areas of interest.

Compensation was offered as a form of gratitude for participating in the study. Participants were provided with one $25USD electronic gift card to a store of their choice or the transfer of funds directly to their PayPal account. Offering compensation to participants is sometimes viewed as controversial within research, specifically, the levels and types of incentives are a contentious subject.\textsuperscript{174} Nonetheless, compensation remains essential, as it has been found that incentives or a form of remuneration are required to generate data and motivate

or encourage participation. Further, participants have discussed how offering fair compensation is imperative, as it has been noted by participants that $20 should be a minimum with no strings attached. However, one creator chose to instead have the money donated to a sex work-based organization.

Participants had the option of completing the interview via Zoom or telephone, and both options were recorded. If the interview occurred over Zoom, participants were asked to change their display name to their assigned pseudonym. In accordance with Zoom recording requirements, an audio and video file are saved, even if no cameras are in use. The recordings were saved locally to my computer and the video file was deleted immediately. While the cloud is a popular feature to save and store files, storing data in Zoom’s cloud storage is less safe than storing locally on a researcher’s secure and private computer. Storing the recordings locally onto my personal computer enhances the security of the data and thus, the confidentiality of participants. Further, Zoom video recordings cannot be deleted when saved to the cloud, and if the participant chooses to keep their video on during the interview, their confidentiality is less secure. Participants were not required to have their video on, but they were not required to keep it off, as I wanted participants to feel the most comfortable and secure when discussing their experiences. I also had concerns that by forcing participants to have their camera on or off, they may opt-out of the study if they felt that they were restricted in the presentation of themselves during the interview. If the interview was held via telephone, it was recorded live to Otter.ai.

175 Mduluza et al., “Study Participants Incentives,” 2-8.
which is the same transcription service that was also used to transcribe the audio files from the Zoom recordings.

Conducting qualitative interviews via Zoom or telephone is not new and both methods offer benefits when conducting research. Zoom offers a free plan and does not require the participant to have an account or download the application, compared to Skype, which requires the participant and researcher to download the program and create an account.\textsuperscript{179} Due to the accessibility of Zoom, as well as telephone calls, participants and researchers do not have to be in the same geographical location to be in the interview, unlike in-person interviews. Studies have compared Zoom interviews to in-person interviews as being able to also form and maintain rapport between the researcher and the participant, due to its visual element, which can be used to facilitate greater engagement, as the camera simulates an in-person interview.\textsuperscript{180} Due to the nature of the content that is discussed in an interview, participants’ homes or private environments can contribute to the responses of their personal experiences, as their interview took place in a space they felt comfortable in and recognized.\textsuperscript{181} Further, through the use of video interviews compared to telephone interviews, it has been noted that participants felt willing to share their personal experiences, as they can see who they are sharing their experiences with, which makes them feel more comfortable.\textsuperscript{182} Throughout all interviews, I kept my camera on at

\textsuperscript{179} Gray et al., “Expanding Qualitative Research,” 1293.
all times. However, it has been noted that some participants have experienced embarrassment and uneasiness when talking about certain topics, such as sexual behaviour, as the interviewer can see the participants’ faces. Thus, having the camera off or interviewing via telephone offers comfort for the participant. Maintaining eye contact through Zoom may be difficult due to the quality of video resolution. If the participant has their camera off or in the case of a telephone call, eye contact is impossible.

In total, 575 creators were contacted; 289 creators were found through Twitter and 287 were found through Instagram. The interviews were transcribed through Otter.ai and then coded in NVivo using thematic coding. All participants identified as female, the majority were in a form of a relationship and currently lived in the United States. The average age was 25, and almost all participants had a post-secondary level of education. Most creators had first joined OnlyFans some time in 2020 or later, the average number of paid fans was 859, the average hours spent working on content each week was 23, and the average monthly income was $7343USD.

Visual Content Analysis

In addition to the brief survey and semi-structured interviews, this research involves a visual content analysis of Instagram accounts of OnlyFans creators who post sexually suggestive content. Due to the limited visual content analysis of OnlyFans creators available, I identified this as an opportunity to illustrate the interaction between creators and their fans, and to explore whether and how this may be different than the interactions between the seller and client within direct sexual services. Through a visual content analysis of OnlyFans creators on Instagram, I

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184 Mabragaña, Carballo-Diézquez, and Giguere, 866; Sedgwick and Spiers, “Use of Videoconferencing,” 7.
185 There are factors that complicate any calculation, and these calculations are provided as context, and are not reflective of the OnlyFans creator population as a whole.
hope to evidence how the promotion of their content and the relationships between sex work and sexual labour have changed, particularly due to the influence and popularity of technology and social media. Many OnlyFans creators promote their accounts on Instagram to attract viewers and followers of their content, in an attempt to entice them to subscribe to their OnlyFans. A key aim of my visual analysis is to understand how creators are interacting and engaging with their followers and fans off of the OnlyFans application, and how they are promoting their account to generate more fans and followers. The second aim is to understand the similarities and differences between the content creators examined and whether their experiences align with current understandings of sex work.

The purpose of visual methods is to offer insights into the life and experiences of the participants, which may not be accessed otherwise, and which may present realms and findings previously unanticipated. A visual content analysis can assist in answering the research questions through an examination of OnlyFans creators’ Instagram content and account, which will illustrate how creators use other social media platforms to engage in sex work or sexual labour, and how this engagement may be different than previous engagement by sex workers. Studies using a visual analysis have examined a range of media forms, including advertising, films, and political campaign material. A visual content analysis can demonstrate how “versions of reality are constructed and fashioned over time and across a variety of media.” Multiple studies have used a visual content analysis when examining Instagram content of celebrities and institutions to observe and understand the types of pictures posted, elements of

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188 Parry, “Quantitative Content Analysis,” 353.
the pictures, and how followers and viewers interacted with the content. As OnlyFans creators are using their Instagram account for different reasons than the accounts examined in the above studies, an analysis of their content will showcase how individuals of sex work or sexual labour are using social media to build and promote their account to obtain customers.

Visual methodologies involve the observation and analysis of visual materials, such as photographs, artworks, video clips, or advertisements. This method has two approaches. The first approach utilizes and analyzes existing materials and/or new materials generated by the researcher. The second approach involves participants generating photographs, videos, or other visual materials where usually, the participants then discuss their experiences and impressions of the visual materials in interviews. For my research, I used the first method. Instagram is a free photo and video sharing social media platform developed in 2010 and has since evolved to where businesses and brands are a large portion of users of the platform. On the platform, users can follow other users, which range from friends to celebrities, to view their content, “like” and comment on their content, or share their content. Users can message other users, as well as edit their photos or videos directly in the application. Instagram can be accessed on smartphones through the mobile application or on a desktop browser. The combination of personal and business profiles on the platform allows for engagement with clients and business relations.

Due to the multiple methods employed in this study and very real-time limitations, I chose to analyze creators’ Instagram accounts each day over seven days, by looking at their

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191 Barbour, 185.
192 Barbour, 185.
accounts and posts at the same time once a day and then continuing where I left off the next day. Also of interest are the number of posts and stories made, the type of post made, their follower and following count, the caption, and hashtags of each post. Of interest was how the creator appeared if they were in the post, key elements in the photo or video, the location of the photo or video, how they interacted with their followers, if they explicitly referenced their OnlyFans account, and whether and how the content that they shared generated more followers and greater engagement with their content. I anticipated that the growth of their Instagram accounts and content engagement contributes to their success on OnlyFans. While there was not a significant amount of overlap between the interviews and visual content analysis, the two methods were more parallel studies that still worked to answer the research questions. The analysis was achieved by comparing a variety of account types, ranging from nano-influencers (<10,000 followers), mid-level influencers (100 000 – 500 000 followers), and macro-influencers (>1 million followers). While there are creators with account followings that are outside of these ranges, many accounts that I viewed when finding potential creators for the analysis fit within these ranges.

Currently, no visual content analysis of OnlyFans creators on social media platforms exists, however, one visual analysis of OnlyFans within the news, blogs, and memes has been conducted.\(^\text{193}\) In another visual and contextual analysis of 172 Instagram influencers who engage in sexualized labour, researchers examine how aesthetics, emotion, and ‘porn chic’ manifests in digital sexual labour in order to illustrate the effects of this type of labour that has expanded to a

digital context. The study revealed how influencers on Instagram are using the platform to capitalize on porn chic sexualization and aesthetic and emotional labour while using the platform to entice followers to engage with the sexual and emotional labour further on other platforms.

This use of a visual analysis is consistent with an early study by Niki Fritz et al. In Fritz et al., the study examines internet pornography by analyzing 300 pornographic scenes directed toward women and comparing them to mainstream pornography, to understand the female sexual objectification and sexual agency within the scenes. The study examined the scenes from various websites and categories, in which they noted sexual objectification (stripping and verbal and physical aggression) and sexual agency (initiation, touching). Overall, the study used a visual content analysis to examine the presence of individuals and their actions within pornography or sexual imagery, to illustrate the appearance of such individuals and their portrayal within a sexual context for pleasure. A visual analysis provides specifics on the content and individuals involved, which contribute to insightful perspectives and findings.

As with all studies, there are several ethical considerations for studies involving social media. Social media websites are an emerging research tool, as they provide a context within a naturalistic setting of the daily life of the participant. When a social media site is used for observational research, the observed content must be public, information should be “identifiable, but not private,” and “information gathering requires no interaction with the person who posted it

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198 Fritz and Paul, 644.
199 Moreno et al., “Social Media Research,” 708.
When analyzing the Instagram accounts and posts of OnlyFans creators, I only viewed public accounts and if an account was made private throughout the seven days, I intended to stop the analysis of the creator and destroy any obtained data, but this did not occur. While consent may be interpreted as implied when the account and posts are made public, consent should be viewed as withdrawn when the account or posts are made private. I did not communicate or engage with the creators or their followers throughout the seven-day analysis.

Many social media sites such as Instagram and Twitter allow users to make their accounts private or public. A private account only allows approved followers to view the content that is shared, whereas a public account allows anyone, whether a user of the platform or not, to view the content. Some researchers view consent differently within a public and private domain, which leads to the question of whether one’s data is private, even if it is within a public domain.

The increase and advancement of the internet and digital research contexts such as social media sites have also presented new issues with consent in research. While researchers may intend to incorporate or consider informed consent within digital research or digital observation, questions arise such as, is consent needed? How can consent be obtained in online forums or anonymous chatrooms? Debates have arisen regarding whether consent is needed to analyze the content of social media, with some researchers arguing that consent is needed, while others

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200 Moreno et al., 709.
201 Laestadius, “Instagram,” 583.
argue that the data is published text.\textsuperscript{204} Previously, some participants felt that consent within social media observation is unnecessary, whereas others felt that researchers should obtain the consent of the users they are observing and analyzing.\textsuperscript{205} Overall, there is an unclear consensus on whether researchers should treat social media data as public and whether consent from users is needed.\textsuperscript{206} Despite this fact, when informed consent was not required, I anonymized the social media users that I analyzed for my visual analysis, by storing the usernames, account statistics, and notes on the accounts and posts in password-protected documents.

The creators whose images I examined were different than the 10 creators who were interviewed. Since I would not be interacting one-on-one with these individuals, it allowed me to examine and interpret their content without being told directly by them about the meaning of their content. Further, as the purpose of a visual methodology is to examine a series of visual materials such as pictures, videos, or advertisements, it allowed me to observe the creators’ content and their daily experiences, without disrupting them as they produce their content and complete their work. As there are currently no visual content analyses of OnlyFans creators on Instagram who sell sexual content, the analysis offers unexplored perspectives and information regarding creators and the use of social media platforms. By observing the content from a researcher’s perspective, rather than a fan or follower perspective, the analysis offers an in-depth view of creators and the specifics of their content from a different vantage point, one that is not primarily about pleasure-seeking.

\textsuperscript{204} Markham and Buchanan, “Internet Research,” 611.
\textsuperscript{206} Hibbin, Samuel, and Derrick, “From ‘a Fair Game,’” 150.
To find the 10 creators for my visual analysis, I repeated the same process to find my interviewees on Instagram only. When searching for creators, my only selective criteria was their follower count and their posting consistency. Ideal posting consistency included a creator who appeared to have an active online presence, which was determined by whether or not they regularly posted content to their account. Consistent engagement was also based on the creator’s frequency of activity with their page and followers through examining their stories, comments, and replies. As I would be observing a creators’ account and content for seven days, it was critical to find creators who posted regularly, to ensure that I could conduct a thorough analysis of their representational practices and use of the social media platform. To determine their posting consistency, I looked to see how often the creator had posted in the two weeks leading up to the visual analysis start date. In many cases, I came across creators who I considered to be inadequate candidates. Some creators were posting for the first time in a week or even months and thus, I viewed them as unreliable in posting consistently over the weeklong analysis period. Furthermore, other creators’ accounts were simply too new to accurately analyze their posting consistency. I was not selective with any identity characteristics, as I did not want to limit the creators for my analysis, as creators consisting of all identity characteristics can provide insight into the analysis. Further, it may be difficult, or even impossible to select participants based on certain identity characteristics, as some characteristics may not be easily identifiable, or if the creator did not list the characteristic in their Instagram bio. Of the 10 accounts selected, six were considered to be nano-influencers (<10,000 followers), one was considered to be a mid-level influencer (100,000 – 500,000 followers), and three were considered to be macro-influencers (>1 million followers). Overall, the visual analysis of the creators’ Instagram accounts offers a
unique insight into their lives and behaviours as content creators who sell sexually suggestive content.
Chapter 4: Theoretical Framework

Sex-Positive Theory

Given the sexually explicit nature of OnlyFans content creators, this thesis draws, in part, on sex-positive theory to help contextualize and make sense of my data. Arising from the feminist sex wars where advocates, activists, and radical feminist scholars “argued that pornography was degrading to women by representing women as disempowered victims that lacked sexual agency and needed protection,” the concept of sex-positive was formed.\(^\text{207}\) While there is not a singular accepted definition of sex-positivity, various definitions have been constructed to encapsulate the movement.\(^\text{208}\) A sex-positive society is often contrasted to a sex-negative society to understand views on sex. A sex-positive approach refers to “being open, communicative, and accepting of individuals’ differences related to sexuality and sexual behaviour.”\(^\text{209}\) Furthermore, it “is about allowing for a wide range of sexual expression that takes into account sexual identities, orientations, and behaviors; gender presentation; accessible health care and education; and multiple important dimensions of human diversity.”\(^\text{210}\) Conversely, a sex-negative society views sex as inherently bad, while constructing sex as being problematic and risky.\(^\text{211}\)

Sex positivity seems apt, given that OnlyFans creators use the platform to embrace and explore their sexuality and sexual behaviours with other users. This theory allows these creators to challenge sex-negative perceptions as the creators are able to produce and share their content


on their terms, while simultaneously monetizing the content. Sexual autonomy and all forms of consensual sexual activities as sources of pleasure and fulfillment are valued within sex positivity. Sexual pleasure is a central aspect of this framework. Pleasure involves the production of visual or auditory stimuli in a sexual manner. Although in a digital and indirect manner, OnlyFans creators can be understood as workers who can still pleasure providers. Both creators and subscribers are affected by the pleasure and fulfillment of producing, sharing, and consuming the sexual content. This theoretical framework is helpful for making sense of commercial sexual relations and as a counter to stigmatizing discourses of sex and sex work.

Sexual Economics Theory

Due to the commercial aspect of OnlyFans, theories of sexual economics, as well as Roy F. Baumeister and Kathleen Vohs’ use of social exchange theory to understand the economics involved within sexual exchanges are considered. Baumeister and Vohs consider “how individual behavior is shaped by the market and other aspects of the collective network,” while using natural tendencies and motivations to further the understanding of economic exchange.

To situate this theory, the scholars turn to social exchange theory to explain and understand the interactions, costs, benefits, and gains of the two parties involved. Baumeister and Vohs position their social exchange analysis of sex by explaining that sex is a female resource. In exchange for sexual favours, women are the suppliers and receive valued goods, whereas male sexuality cannot receive valued goods in exchange as they are the purchasers and consumers.

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213 Kaplan, 94-95.
216 Baumeister and Vohs, 340.
217 Baumeister and Vohs, 341.
218 Baumeister and Vohs, 341.
The exchange of goods for sex is not necessarily only about money but can encompass a range of goods where women can also obtain respect, protection, opportunities, material favours, work promotions or course grades, commitment, attention, and love.\textsuperscript{219} Sellers compete against each other, while buyers compete against each other.\textsuperscript{220}

However, sex is also a resource for non-female individuals. Non-females can be suppliers of sex and non-males can demand and desire sex. While OnlyFans creators of sexually explicit content may predominately be female, they can also be non-female, and the purchasers and consumers of the content can also be non-male. Creators, regardless of gender, have the opportunity to obtain the above-valued goods from customers in exchange for sexual content. Creators compete against other creators to obtain additional subscribers and thus, the potential to earn a higher income and/or other valued goods. Fans compete against other fans to reach a top spot or in the creator’s life, by consistently subscribing to the creator and/or tipping the creator or requesting additional content in exchange for money to show their loyalty to the creator.

\textbf{Emotional Labour}

Emotional labour, coined by Arlie Hochschild, defines this theory as the “management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display,” wherein the emotional labour is exchanged for money.\textsuperscript{221} Hochschild applies this theory within the context of service work and is composed of three characteristics: The contact requirement of face-to-face or voice-to-voice with the public; the production requirement of the worker to impose an emotional state onto another person, such as the customer or client; and through training and supervision, employers exercise

control over employees’ emotional activities. Hochschild further illustrates the theory by discussing surface acting and deep acting. Surface acting involves one changing one’s outward appearance, through “body language, the put-on sneer, the posed shrug, the controlled sign,” wherein one does not deceive ourselves, but deceives others about one’s true feelings. On the other hand, deep acting involves a real, self-induced feeling, where the “display is a natural result of working on feeling; the actor does not try to seem happy or sad but rather expresses spontaneously.” Negative psychosocial outcomes, including burnout and job stress, may arise as a result of the control over workers within emotional labour.

OnlyFans creators of sexually explicit content experience emotional labour through the necessity to appeal to customers and their desires and demands, in exchange for money or another valued good. Creators’ content creation can be viewed as a business or service, in which good customer service and loyalty require a significant amount of emotional labour. With online sex work, there is the potential for emotional labour to be different from direct sex work, due to the accessibility of creating and consuming the content, among other factors. As discussed below, OnlyFans creators are often engaging in both surface acting and deep acting, but in order to retain customers and maintain exceptional customer service, creators are required to engage with customers more through deep acting. However, if creators are engaging with fans off the OnlyFans platform, there is the potential that creators may be engaging in different amounts of surface and deep acting. As will be evident in the visual content analysis, creators can engage with their fans and followers in various and different manners on Instagram than on the

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222 Hochschild, Managed Heart, 102.
223 Hochschild, 38.
224 Hochschild, 36-38.
225 Hochschild, 38.
OnlyFans platform. Through these manners, creators may be employing surface and deep acting differently as creators have different capabilities in connecting with their fans, in which the engagement may require varying amounts of acting.
Chapter 5: Interview Findings

This chapter explores the findings from the interviews and sheds light on OnlyFans content creators and their relationship to the platform and sex work.

Sex Work

Key to this study is understanding how OnlyFans content creators describe their labour on the platform and how they describe themselves in addition to, or alongside, the relatively non-descript label of “content creator.” To this end, a key question posed to the participants was whether and how they understood their OnlyFans work in relation to sex work. Participants invariably said that they do view their OnlyFans content as sex work, while at the same time also suggesting that it differs from current understandings of sex work. For instance, many participants explained that sexually explicit content is generally used for someone to pleasure themselves, acknowledging that their fans are using their OnlyFans content for the purpose of sexual pleasure. Brynn and Margot described that while OnlyFans is not full-service sex work, escorting, or other types of in-person physical sex work, there is an online sexual relationship with their clients. Farrah mentions that the point of her content is to arouse people, and while she is not arouses someone in person, she states that “sex work these days is a lot more of an umbrella term than it used to be.” However, while Aubrey viewed her work as sex work, she also considers it modelling. Aubrey states,

I guess you could say I do sex work, but at the same time, I have more of an emotional relationship with these guys. I flirt with them every once in a while, and I create a place for them to live out their sexual fantasies. I’m fulfilling a sexual desire or sexual fantasy because they want pleasure right now… I guess the disconnect between what we [OnlyFans creators] do versus people on the street or other forms, is we aren’t actually
touching them. I’m not meeting up with them… But I would also consider it modelling in a way.

Aubrey’s response offers insight into how creating adult content may not necessarily mean sex work, as it could be viewed as modelling or possibly something else. At the same time, it demonstrates how direct and physical sex work is misunderstood and exceptionalized. Aubrey explained how her relationship with her fans is more emotional. In-person physical sex workers also have emotional bonds by conducting emotional labour, where Teela Sanders explains how in-person sex workers employ emotional labour by constructing a manufactured identity to manage the emotional labour involved in their work while appealing and conforming to the client and their desires.\textsuperscript{227} Moreover, escorts have explained that they must have communication skills to talk with clients while having to share themselves emotionally with the client.\textsuperscript{228} Sari Van der Poel elaborates by discussing how call “boys” must attract their customers, where they take their time with the customer if they want them to return, in which a greater emotional involvement is formed after each return.\textsuperscript{229} Similarly, OnlyFans creators must attract their customers by sharing their content often on social media platforms, where creators must employ physical and emotional labour to have returning subscribers. Furthermore, adult modelling involves content that is often sexual in nature and typically includes posing nude, wearing lingerie, and acting provocatively.\textsuperscript{230} Adult modelling has been described as pornographic or artistic nudes, and as a popular option for individuals, particularly females, to enter the

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
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modelling industry and to “become a pornstar.” However, this idea of transitioning from adult modelling to a pornstar may be more of an assumption, due to the association of these two concepts, when in many ways, they may not overlap. Based on the interviews with my participants, much of the content that participants create on OnlyFans fits under the definition of adult modelling, as many creators’ content only involved wearing lingerie, or posing nude or semi-nude, in addition to wearing regular clothing and costumes. Some creators posted more erotic content as well, which could shift their work from being more adult modelling to pornography. Of note here, however, is the common acknowledgement that many images of models are used for sexual purposes yet are not described as sex work. Nevertheless, nude modelling, even in educational contexts, often results in stigma, due to the stereotypes that are a reflection of fear, shame, and discrimination.

In addition to Aubrey, Riley and Mia also referred to themselves as OnlyFans models, with Mia also referring to herself as a pornstar, as she creates sexually explicit content, which she explains is porn. For Riley and Mia, they maintained these titles while still explaining that they are a sex worker, which demonstrates that being a sex worker may encompass more than what is traditionally assumed, as in this case, where they are content creators, models, and sex workers. Their narrative demonstrates that with new forms of sex work forming, particularly with online content, there may no longer be one title that corresponds to the individual and the work they offer to their customers. The use of various or different titles and their blurry

boundaries helps disrupt what we think about sex work, thus potentially lessening the stigma associated with sex work if it is now demonstrated that a sex worker could have more than just one title. While many of the participants did not create their OnlyFans with the intention of becoming a pornstar, their responses demonstrate that sex work is adopted as a label when making sense of their labour and that for some of them, pornstar is an accurate and adopted descriptor. This intention of modelling raises the question of whether such modelling should be described as sex work or if it should be described as simply modelling. With the introduction of more platforms that are being used to create, distribute, and consume sexually explicit content, digital sexual labour continues to show that adult content is being altered in various ways, in which the understanding of sexual labour is altered as well. Digital sexual labour offers traditional, but also new manners of sharing sexually explicit content with customers, which affects the meaning of sex work and the manner in which workers experience themselves as sex workers. A parallel can be drawn between sex-positive theory and my participants identifying as a sex worker, as the platform is allowing creators to explore their sexuality alongside their fans’ sexuality, in an open, but digital environment.\footnote{Williams, Prior, and Wegner, “Resolving Social Problems,” 273.} Further, creators can embrace their identities while pleasuring customers through the in-direct production and consumption of the content by fans.\footnote{Kaplan, “Sex-Positive Law,” 95.}

Motivation

When participants were asked why they joined OnlyFans, the majority mentioned struggling financially due to not earning enough at their job at the time to support themselves, wanting additional income to support themselves, or not having a job or losing their job because of COVID-19. Aubrey emphasizes how her previous job encouraged her to start her OnlyFans:
I was working an office job after I graduated in 2020 and I was just absolutely miserable… I was making literally no money at my office job almost to the point where I couldn't even pay for my bills monthly. They were paying me minimum wage. So, I was like, okay, well I need money some other how and with influencing I was getting brand deals every once in a while, but it wasn't as much. So, you know what, I'm going to start an OnlyFans, but I'm only gonna keep it underground.

However, Riley’s financial needs differed from the rest of the participants. Riley disclosed, I was in a really abusive relationship at the time. I'd been in that relationship for about four years and the person that I was with wouldn't give me any of my money or anything. OnlyFans was kind of like a fresh start for me, it was something that I started doing behind their back, and they didn't know, and once I was able to get enough money, I was able to get myself out of that situation. I definitely thank OnlyFans for that a lot.

The responses indicate that the participants turned to OnlyFans for a primary or supplementary source of income, due to their life situations. Research has shown that women enter sex work when there is a lack of economic opportunities. The findings from my study are consistent with other motivations for entering sex work, such as in studies on sex work, camming, sugar dating, and the gig economy. Many gig workers have explained how they reply on gig work as a primary or supplementary source of income, or to earn money to use for recreational or

personal choices, which are similar responses of my participants. Joelle recalls how her last day shooting porn on set was the day when her city went into lockdown because of the pandemic. Joelle started her OnlyFans in 2017 but became more reliant on it as a means of earning income after COVID-19 caused porn studios to temporarily shut down. Many adult film actors also joined OnlyFans when productions were halted due to COVID-19. Joelle and other adult film actors’ experiences are consistent with the findings of Lilith Brouwers and Tess Hermann’s study, which examined how in-person sex workers were affected by COVID-19. Although there are differences between Joelle and the sex workers identified in the study, Joelle’s experiences and the study illustrate how in-person sexual labour workers were also affected by COVID-19 and the lockdowns, as workers were unable to or did not feel comfortable continuing their work, and were often unable to obtain governmental unemployment or pandemic-related financial support. While research shows that women who enter into sex work due to a lack of economic opportunity may face exploitation, unsafe working conditions, or other physical risks, equally necessary is research that discusses how digital sex work may offer alternatives to these conditions and as ways out of domestic violence and economic abuse, as was the case for Riley. A link can be drawn between my participants’ motivations and the theory of sexual economics, as they are sharing sexually explicit content with fans, in exchange for

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money, but creators have also obtained other goods, as will be discussed below, such as respect, attention, and opportunities.\footnote{Baumeister at al., “Competing for Love,” 231.}

Benefits/Appeal

Financial

While some creators explained that the extra income did not drastically change their life, almost all participants mentioned the financial freedom, security, and rewards that come with being an OnlyFans creator. Participants discussed how they now have money to cover their bills, obtain dental work and health insurance, the ability to buy a house and car, have the ability to travel, and to be able to help family members and take care of others financially.

Worker Autonomy

Participants often expressed the enjoyment of being their own boss and the advantages that come with it, such as not having to report to anyone, working at your own pace, and setting your own schedule and hours. Aubrey, as well as other participants, emphasized the control that creators have in being their own boss, by determining the content that they want to produce and the prices they set. In comparing her work on OnlyFans to traditional understandings of sex work, Aubrey noted, “I think about the fact that women that were already sex workers or even pornstars, they now get to have the choice to choose their rates… you film the video, you can set your price, you get to choose what flies, what doesn't fly.” Participants conveyed control in other manners, by expressing the power that they have over fans. Many participants explained that they can block or delete people that are being rude, limit their interaction with fans while still allowing them to pay the monthly fee, or even choose to charge them more. Ultimately,
participants expressed their enjoyment of the freedom and flexibility that they have as a creator, as they can do the work on their terms and from anywhere and at any time. As Farrah stated,

       Instead of having to go by the book and having to do things this way, this way, this way, and this way, you have more freedom to kind of go, well, this isn't working for me, how can I make this flow easier… [In] traditional jobs, you don't have that much freedom, you're told what to wear, how to wear your hair, what's acceptable makeup, what's not. There's a lot of things coming down on you all the time, whereas with OnlyFans, it's all on me. It's a lot of responsibility, but there's freedom of how to get it done, how to go about things.

The financial benefits and autonomy that OnlyFans creators discussed correlate to the financial benefits, autonomy, and flexibility that participants expressed in studies on sex work, camming, sugar dating, and the gig economy.242 My data reveals that creators experience these benefits in a different capacity than sex work, camming, and sugar dating, as the creators do not have to be in-person with their customers or record themselves live to obtain these benefits. In many ways, creating content on OnlyFans could be viewed as a work-from-home job, where many of these benefits are different from or could be considered greater than those offered by traditional work-from-home jobs. However, there are benefits that OnlyFans cannot afford, such as health benefits.

While some of my participants discussed having photoshoots or meeting with other creators to create content, much of the work can take place in their homes or remotely anywhere. This offered creators rewards such as work freedom, that many of their previous jobs were

unable to offer. When Farrah was asked what she would do if she left the platform, she described
that a different job that did not involve creating content would be less appealing now that she has
been out of customer service for a while, and after being exposed to the benefits that OnlyFans
offers. Participants who had left the platform corroborated Farrah’s experience, by explaining
that they thoroughly enjoyed their time on OnlyFans and miss it, particularly because of the
benefits and appeals that they experienced as a creator. Nonetheless, these participants left the
platform due to obtaining a job which made it difficult to also be a content creator, or because
they found creating content too exhausting.

Confidence building

Although less common, numerous participants discussed wanting to improve their self-
confidence as their reason for joining OnlyFans. Farrah and Margot, for instance, explained that
they had self-confidence issues and wanted to become more comfortable and less insecure with
their body. Margot notes, “Porn, and making this content was really just a form of coming to
terms with myself and finding self-love and acceptance… And that's why it wasn't really about
the money for me. It was more just about feeling good about myself… Making content was
mostly a love letter to myself.” Farrah was encouraged to join OnlyFans after talking with one of
her friends who was a cam girl who had positive experiences with that form of work, contending
that OnlyFans might be a good platform to help with her self-confidence issues. Farrah reveals
how she is happier with herself and has the creative freedom to explore and promote her BDSM
lifestyle on her account. She also no longer feels the need to constantly fit in and is now
confident when going out to events to promote herself.

According to many of my participants, their confidence increased as a result of creating
and selling this type of content, even if they did not create their OnlyFans with the intention of
improving their confidence. Aubrey disclosed that she was bullied when growing up, was called a whore, and was initially not confident enough in herself to create an OnlyFans account. She explained that her confidence has now changed,

Now, people hate on me because I make money from shit that they used to bully me for and I'm like, I literally can't win, so I'm gonna do what makes me happy and at the end of the day. Expressing my sexuality and dabbling in that and this content makes me happy. It makes me feel confident, it makes me proud of being a woman, it makes me feel sexy. Like why not… It's like why not embrace the way that I look instead of hiding away from it all the time?

Other participants also expressed how they found increased confidence and empowerment when receiving messages from their fans about their content and their customer service. Participants described constantly receiving compliments, getting pampered, and being told by fans that they love and worship you throughout the day. In Cecilia Benoit et al.’s study, researchers reported that participants experienced boosted self-confidence from sex work, mainly due to receiving positive comments, gratification, or compliments from individuals close to them or clients.

Participants in Benoit et al.’s study also shared that by having greater work and financial independence, such as from opening their own escort agency, their confidence increased. In a study by Mille Huglstad et al., participants similarly reported struggling with insecurity and that engaging in sex work has significantly improved their self-confidence. Further, participants in Huglstad et al.’s study noted that the responsibilities and control that they had when being self-

employed contributed to their empowerment. Although participants in my study did not state that the control and responsibilities that they have as an OnlyFans creator contributed to their confidence, there are parallels between Benoit et al. and Huglstad et al.’s studies and my study’s findings that suggest that these aspects of OnlyFans may have contributed to creators’ increased confidence.

Misconceptions about OnlyFans Work

Every participant expressed that their fans and followers expressed similar misconceptions about OnlyFans, such as that OnlyFans is not a real job or business, or that it is not considered work. Joelle described how she has turned down social invitations with friends explaining that she has work to do, with her friends questioning why she cannot do her OnlyFans work later. Joelle has had to clarify that her work involves more than taking pictures, such as uploading and editing the content and scheduling her promotional tweets. Participants overwhelmingly discussed assumptions about OnlyFans as easy work, and as immediately highly lucrative when in fact, it takes a significant amount of work and discipline to create the content, build a following on the account and other social media platforms, and promote the account. Brynn mentions needing to treat your OnlyFans like a real business, as the people are paying for your services.

There is also the assumption that the women who are an OnlyFans creator are lazy and attention seeking. Participants in this study explained how in their experiences, people hold the assumption that being an OnlyFans creator means that you will sleep with anybody, that you are sleeping with lots of people, or that you are automatically working with other creators to create partner content. Halle and Karina explained how they have experienced the assumption that

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245 Huglstad et al., “Meanings of Sex Work,” 73.
female creators of this type of content are whores or sluts that are willing to do anything for money. Farrah stated how people have used it to devalue her OnlyFans and her work, by claiming that the work that she does is dirty. Aubrey reflected on the misconceptions she has experienced by stating,

People think that anybody [OnlyFans creators] is instantly a hoe and that people that do this kind of work are just slutty and they deserve no one in their life… They’re like, this girl just hates herself and she’s going nowhere in life. Actually no, this is a very big steppingstone to a lot of interesting different things I’ve always wanted to try.

The comments that Aubrey received are not uncommon within sex work, where derogatory labels are often used to describe such workers due to the stigma of sex work.\(^{246}\) Aubrey is challenging the stigma and stereotypes but doing so as a sex worker can be difficult.\(^{247}\) Mia and Riley described constantly receiving comments about how they have daddy or mommy issues and that they must not have had a healthy relationship with their parents. Joelle shared assumptions that all of her fans are men, when in fact, many are female and are couples. She added how there is an assumption that all fans are gross, pervy, and rude, where she clarifies that a lot of them are actually lonely. Joelle, who has experience in several forms of sex work states,

I think that a lot of my experience in sex work has shown me how much of our society emotionally stunts and neglects men and how they don't feel like they have anyone. I constantly get, “I don't have anyone in my life that I can talk to about this. I don't have anyone that I feel safe talking about my kinks or my fetishes or even just my life.”


After participants revealed to their families that they were creating sexually explicit content online, there were assumptions that participants would engage in in-person sex work or that they would start using drugs.

**Downsides**

In addition to facing stigmatization and negative misconceptions about their work and themselves, the majority of creators discussed harassment and overwork as key downsides to OnlyFans content creators. While some of the content described by the creators as nude photographs may be considered more “respectable” than explicit still pornography, creators who post artistic nude photographs or even semi-nude photographs describe receiving offensive and rude remarks and assumptions about themselves and their work on OnlyFans. For instance, creators such as Halle and Mia spoke about receiving hateful comments or comments about their appearance, with Mia expressing that it was initially difficult to overlook the harassment she experienced. Conversely, Joelle stated how she gets more hate for posting her thoughts and opinions online than she does for posting sexually explicit content.

Several participants discussed how exhausting preparing and creating content, and constantly engaging with fans is, leading some participants to take a step back from their accounts. Due to her success on OnlyFans, Aubrey explained how it has led her to be very high-strung, stating, “I feel like there's always something I have to be doing or always someone I have to be answering. Right now, I have 30 messages that I need to respond to… It's like I have 30 Boyfriends.” Similarly, Brynn experienced burnout from talking to fans every day, while maintaining a relationship with her family, friends, and partner, as she found it draining to give her fans and personal relationships the energy that both groups expected. She further explained that her OnlyFans altered her relationship with her partner and their relationship sexually, as she
found that pleasure and work became intertwined, making it difficult to separate the two when not working. Margot further explained that when making sexual content, there can be misconceptions when dating, with assumptions that you are going to be cheating, especially if you interact with people on your platform. She clarified that it is not cheating but creating content for fans and engaging with them. These findings overlap with those in a study by Clare Bellhouse et al., wherein researchers examined women who engaged in sex work and found that their romantic relationships were impacted by issues of jealousy, distrust and dishonesty, pragmatic issues, and stigma, regardless of whether their partner was aware or not that they were working in the sex industry.248 Participants in a study on sex work in New York City disclosed the challenges of maintaining a romantic relationship, where boundaries and sexual and emotional fidelity become complicated.249

The narratives of these OnlyFans content creators compare to the burnout that female indoor sex workers experience, with at least one study noting the emotional exhaustion of sex workers, and how their level of burnout was “significantly higher than those of nurses and equally high as those of patients.”250 However, this experience extends beyond sex work and other caring professions, to the realm of social media influencers (SMI) and social media influencing more broadly.251 SMIs are classified as a group of digital content creators who have a “significant online following, distinctive brand persona, and patterned relationships with

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250 Vanwesenbeeck, “Female Indoor Sex Workers,” 636.
commercial sponsors.” As SMIs livelihood depends on social media and developing a degree of familiarity and intimacy with their followers, Brooke Duffy discusses how SMIs do extensive work such as creating, editing, and promoting the content and their account. In many ways, OnlyFans creators could be considered or likely also consider themselves a social media influencer, as they are seeking to build a following, promote themselves, and obtain paid sponsorships, while often creating and editing their own content. Notably, social media fatigue, defined as users who “become overwhelmed with too many sites, too many pieces of content, too many friends and followers and too much time spent online maintaining these connections,” is becoming prevalent amongst SMIs. Hochschild’s theory of emotional labour entails face-to-face and voice-to-voice contact requirements in service work, and while OnlyFans is a type of sexual service work, it does not require face-to-face or voice-to-voice work. However, creators are still employing significant emotional labour with their fans through continuous communication with fans, specifically, through private messaging and sharing content on the platform. Due to the surface and deep acting involved as a creator and social media influencer to maintain their fans and build a following both on the OnlyFans platform and on additional platforms to promote their account, creators are experiencing burnout and job stress. My study thus aligns with and intersects the findings of these studies and Hochschild’s theory, as well as demonstrating how OnlyFans creators must manage the demands of emotional, sexual, and social media labour.

255 Hochschild, Managed Heart, 102.
Concerns – Privacy and Anonymity

Amongst the key concerns about their work on OnlyFans, content creators described fears about breaches of privacy and anonymity. Given the above noted finding that the majority of interviewees self-described as sex workers, it is notable that many participants had told their parents about their work on OnlyFans, a finding that is consistent with, but also different from other forms of sex work. Despite this, however, many of the OnlyFans creators expressed concerns about someone sending their content to their parents or blackmailing them. Halle, for example, described how someone sent the Instagram account that she uses to promote her OnlyFans to different family members who, at the time, did not know that she was a creator. There were also concerns that participants’ parents who are aware that they are an OnlyFans creator and are happy for them, might see the content and then alter their opinions on their work. Participants also expressed concerns about fans or people coming up to them in public or people in their area coming across their accounts. This concern has been noted as a reality in a study by Sunny Jiao and Vicky Bungay. Some participants from my study experienced having an anonymous person send them a message revealing personal details about them, or a fan reaching out to their Instagram and Facebook, making them scared and realizing how easy anyone can find out who you are and your other social media accounts.

Given breaches in privacy and anonymity, some participants described concerns about stalking. One participant disclosed how she has a stalker from prior to creating her OnlyFans account and sees how there could be a heightened risk with the stalker when they are released from jail or the potential of having additional stalkers. Indeed, studies on camming and sex

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worker digital safety have identified how stalking is a potential issue and is heightened in an online environment, where online stalkers have caused a cam model to halt her online work.\textsuperscript{259} Clients have also stalked workers and have shown up at their place of employment, after finding information about them and becoming obsessive.\textsuperscript{260} Participants further discussed issues with fans who have constantly messaged them or made them uncomfortable, stating how they do not engage at all and block them, to protect themselves and prevent further instances from occurring.

Furthermore, participants shared concerns about privacy and anonymity breaches as threats to their reputation, as well as present and future employment, with some noting that they ended their OnlyFans account after starting a new job. Joelle shared concerns about securing housing as a sex worker, revealing that she had to move out of her last apartment after her landlord accused her of running a porn studio in her apartment. She elaborated that as you have to show employment to obtain housing, it can be difficult as an OnlyFans creator, adding that misconceptions regarding sex workers can augment housing obstacles. Joelle and other sex workers often experience misconceptions, stereotypes, and stigma due to their work.\textsuperscript{261} Sex workers have explained the judgement they face from society about their work, and the emotional, social, and legal repercussions, where they have described stigma being one of the most difficult aspects of the job.\textsuperscript{262} Landlords and neighbours have been identified as a potential source of stigma, where due to the stigma, discrimination, and criminalization that sex workers


\textsuperscript{260} McDonald et al., “It’s Stressful,” 380.

\textsuperscript{261} Wolf, “Sex trades,” 290-308.

\textsuperscript{262} Wolf, 297.
often experience, there may be a fear of landlords and being evicted. These concerns are similar to the experiences of a webcam model in Rosie Campbell et al.’s study, where the model explained that her neighbour reported her to their landlord about her being a webcam model, to shame her for her work.

Participants shared that they have concerns about whether creating this type of content could result in them getting blacklisted by countries, which could prevent them from travelling. Sex workers are often refused entry at borders when border control officers assume that they will engage in sex work and violate their visa conditions. In the USA, individuals who have, within the past ten years, engaged in sex work are ineligible for a visa. A sex worker from Canada experienced a ban from the USA for a minimum of five years, after the border guards inspected her phone and discovered her work identity. There are also concerns about having their account hacked or being doxxed, with Mia explaining that she initially did not show her face on her OnlyFans account, but after unintentionally making her fans mad, she was doxxed. Even though there is an OnlyFans watermark on the content that is shared, there are concerns about fans screenshotting or screen recording their content. The concerns of doxxing and having their content recorded are similar to concerns that cam models have shared. Mia mentioned how OnlyFans pulled content for no reason from several creators’ accounts, which has made her and other creators have to re-upload their content. Due to concerns that OnlyFans will continue to do

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267 Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 3.
this, she explained that she has intentions to move her content and fans to another, more reliable platform.

Family/Relationships

All participants had varying experiences with sharing the news or potentially sharing that they were a creator on OnlyFans. Some participants shared that they have not told their family that they are an OnlyFans creator, as they have had no intention to yet, or are concerned with how their family may react and were worried about possible negative effects of telling them. Margot discussed how there are assumptions that creators are deviants or perverts that cannot be in ‘regular’ society. She worried that her family would no longer allow her around other family members due to these misconceptions. Research has shown that there is a fear of being ‘outed’ or willingly disclosing to family that they are a sex worker and the potential sex work stigma from friends, family, or community that could arise from these situations. Many of these workers were concerned that their family would not accept them and their work and would be looked down upon due to their work status. The stigma that male sex workers experience has been discussed, where the men worked hard to prevent their family and friends from knowing about their work and would often avoid posting their faces in online ads. The concealment of their faces is similar to some OnlyFans creators, as identified in my visual content analysis, where two creators did not show or partially showed their faces, likely to avoid having their identity revealed. When creators shared with their families that they were a creator, some family members were initially unhappy that they were creating sexually explicit content. When Mia first

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270 Wong, Holroyd, and Bingham, “Stigma and Sex Work,” 58.

told her family, they were unhappy, but her dad is now her biggest supporter, as he realized that he would not be able to change her mind and wanted to help her succeed. Joelle, who first started in porn and told her family about her work, resulted in them initially not talking for six months, as her family was upset with her choice of work. Although she started in porn before OnlyFans, Joelle’s experience is not uncommon for women in sex work who have experienced disownment or negative reactions from family members for being a sex worker.²⁷² Brynn shared her experiences sharing with her mom that she was an OnlyFans creator stating,

Her reaction, obviously, as my mother was to question it, and to be like, Oh, is that really what you want to be doing, doesn't that go against everything that you stand for? I said that it was everything that I stood for.

After Brynn explained more about OnlyFans and her choice to be a creator, her mother was more understanding. Similarly, other participants discussed how their family members were more accepting after they heard more about the platform and their work, as my participants were able to clarify the assumptions and misconceptions that were held by their families. Conversely, many creators shared that their family has always been happy with their decision to be an OnlyFans creator, with these creators acknowledging how fortunate they are to have always had the support, with one creator getting emotional when talking about the support that she receives from her partner. Participants who were in a form of a relationship revealed that their partners were comfortable with them being an OnlyFans creator and would often help them take content or film with them. However, Brynn explained that she was a creator prior to meeting her boyfriend and while he was initially content with it, his views later changed, as it started to affect their

relationship and the time that she had for him. Participants who had shared with their friends that they were a creator all received support from them.

Celebrities

When asked how creators felt about celebrities joining the platform, many held disapproval about celebrities also posting sexually explicit content on OnlyFans. Celebrities and media personalities such as Amber Rose, Bhad Bhabie, and Lottie Moss, as well as Black Chyna, Amber Rose, and Mia Khalifa, who have previous experience in porn or stripping, have joined OnlyFans and sell various sexually explicit content, ranging from nude content to lingerie photos. However, celebrities may not post content that is as erotic or explicit as some of my participants. Creators expressed disappointment in celebrities and influencers joining the platform to sell similar content, as many creators stated that there are individuals and families who are trying to support themselves and their families, where these famous individuals are taking away from “regular” people and sex workers who have fought for this online space.

Many participants viewed celebrities as competition that they cannot keep up with, due to their already famous status. Several creators referred to the Bella Thorne controversy, which contributed to their reservations about other celebrities joining the platform to sell sexually explicit content. Mia shared that initially, many OnlyFans creators thought that when Thorne joined, it would be great to have a former Disney Channel star join the platform to shake it up, but after Thorne did not post her promised sexual content, it caused fans to question Mia and other creators with whether they would also scam them. Riley expressed similar sentiments,

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explaining that Thorne ruined OnlyFans for a lot of content creators, making it harder for fans to trust creators such as herself. When Karina discussed her thoughts on Thorne, she stated,

It’s very frustrating as a sex worker, especially with people who are making a ton of money already because most sex workers aren't doing that. They're doing this basically to make ends meet. There are some people who have very comfortable lives with it [OnlyFans], but it really hinders everyone else who's been using this platform for years upon years to try to have a career. I was not a fan of everything she [Bella Thorne] did. She already had a career, she already had tons of money, she already is living very comfortably, and then what she did just made sex workers’ lives a lot harder.

Contrarily, some participants did not have a problem with celebrities selling sexually explicit content on OnlyFans. Joelle, who was unimpressed with the Thorne incident, nevertheless explains that “having mainstream celebrities on a platform that also hosts adult content legitimizes it in a very important way… I wish we lived in a society that automatically respected sex work, but we don’t… We’re [sex workers] currently fighting for that [respect], so I think that’s [celebrities] a good thing.” In Thorne’s apology statement on Twitter, she explained that by joining the platform, she was bringing a mainstream face to the platform, in an effort to raise its profile and remove the stigma behind sex and sex work.274 The sexually explicit content that celebrities post on OnlyFans once again, raises the question of what is the distinction between model, actor, pornstar, and sex worker? When celebrities join the platform to sell sexually explicit content, they straddle the line as a model, pornstar, media personality, and sex worker,

274 Bella Thorne(@bellathorne), “PT1 Remove the stigma behind sex, sex work, and the negativity that surrounds the word SEX itself by bringing a mainstream face to it that’s what I was trying,” Twitter, August 29, 2020, 6:24 p.m., https://twitter.com/bellathorne/status/1299835299132891136?s=20&t=FKymC1YrHJp_fYsbibbqA.
while bringing mainstream attention to the platform and making it more well known, by also demonstrating that one can be both in the entertainment industry and a sex worker. The majority of the responses show that the influx of celebrities to the platform has complicated effects: serving as added competition, while also simultaneously helping to reduce the stigma associated with sex work, so long as celebrities are being respectful sellers and are not scamming clients.

Bans

In light of the Bella Thorne controversy, several participants discussed the ban on sexual content that OnlyFans temporarily imposed, and how it altered their perceptions of OnlyFans. Participants shared that the news of the ban was heartbreaking, with Mia disclosing that some creators took their own lives because they were unsure of how they could support themselves and their families without being allowed to post this type of content. Margot explained that the ban exacerbates the belief that sex workers are pervasive or perverts that should be pushed to the shadows because their content is not acceptable. Farrah stated, “the ban was infuriating because it was the same concept [sexually explicit content] that made OnlyFans what it is. They were basically shitting on the very people who allow them [OnlyFans] to exist in the first place… The negative PR they received was rightly deserved.” Some participants stated that their trust in OnlyFans was gone after the ban, where they have the intention to or are already in the process of expanding and moving their content to another platform that they can trust. For Joelle, she was aware that OnlyFans was never intended as an adult content site and that OnlyFans does not hate sex workers but prioritized the business due to the extensive legal and business costs and duties that are associated with running a platform with adult content. Nonetheless, Joelle was still angry with the platform and had turned to various backup plans to support herself if the ban was imposed.
In an article by Zarah Stardust, Stardust interviews Danielle Blunt, co-founder of the website hacking//hustling to understand the issue of de-platforming and its effects on sex workers. Stardust explains how de-platforming is due to various factors “including automated content moderation practices, lack of transparency, and insufficient oversight,” but is largely due to the whore stigma of the law, policy, and tech design. Whore stigma is a concept “to shame sex workers – particularly women – who embody unconventional gender norms, such as selling their body for sex, satisfying lust and fantasies, and carrying and transmitting sexually-transmitted diseases.” Blunt explains how de-platforming is a type of structural violence, where “sex workers are denied access to the tools that our civilian peers use because we are determined to be ‘high risk,’” by disproportionately losing “access to social media platforms, bank accounts, and financial technologies.” Blunt elaborates that working online provides sex workers with a greater opportunity to create space between themselves and the client while negotiating the terms of the interaction. When de-platforming occurs, individuals lose these tools needed to earn money to support themselves and their families, while also forgoing harm reduction tools, causing them to take greater risks in their work. The article demonstrates how sex workers experience unfair and disproportionate online policing, which impacts their safety and livelihood. Although the ban on OnlyFans was suspended, Stardust and Blunt shed light on

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279 Blunt and Stardust, 360.
280 Blunt and Stardust, 360.
how an already vulnerable population will continue to experience de-platforming and online policing through the online platforms that sex workers use but are targeted on.

Community

The majority of creators discussed how OnlyFans offers a community feeling, through other creators and from fans. Participants explained that they have gotten to know other creators where they will message them, like and re-share each other’s posts, refer fans to other creators, or create content with each other. Margot explained that she transitioned from posting sexually explicit content on Tumblr and ManyVids before moving to OnlyFans, noting that she was unable to build a connection with consumers on the former platforms, but OnlyFans had a community and interaction feeling as she could interact with her fans more on this platform. Similarly, other creators noted that they can interact with their fans on a personal level, while developing relationships with fans, as you are able to get to know them through conversations. Riley mentions, “I absolutely love all of my fans. You get to create this personal connection with all of these people that you wouldn't be able to do just having a normal nine-to-five job. And I’m truly grateful for being able to have those connections.” For Halle, she states that it is a form of empowerment to help other women out and receive similar support.

As discussed in the literature review, Uttarapong et al.’s study discussed how OnlyFans creators of adult content rely on instrumental and informational support to navigate the platform.281 My findings are consistent with the study by demonstrating how my participants use other creators for support and tips, to find content inspiration, to assist in generating a fanbase, to appeal to a wider audience, and to be successful.282 Since OnlyFans does not have a search

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282 Uttarapong et al., 1-7.
feature, it can be difficult for creators to reach the audience that they seek, as fans cannot easily come across them on the platform, without previously knowing their username or being provided with a link to their account. Other forms of sex work or sexual labour have also relied on the sex work community and digital forums to solicit and obtain advice, tips, and information on clients. However, the experiences of OnlyFans creators demonstrate that with the changes to forms of sex work, individuals can use and rely on other creators in new manners to help one another promote and garner interest in their accounts, where many of my participants joined digital communities on other social media platforms to navigate the online sexual labour environment.

Chapter 6: Visual Content Analysis Findings

With the advancement of technology, social media has become an increasingly popular means of connecting and sharing content with others. On Instagram specifically, users typically share selfies, outfits, daily activities, or other aspects of their lives, while interacting with their followers through these posts. Due to the limited academic research on OnlyFans creators’ lives, how they conduct their accounts and how they engage with their fans are still not well understood. While this study’s interviews showcase how creators operate their accounts and communicate with their fans on the OnlyFans platform, the following visual content analysis demonstrates how creators build their name and account off of the OnlyFans platform. In particular, I consider how OnlyFans content creators use Instagram to entice prospective followers while maintaining their appeal to their current followers. A secondary, but related goal of this content analysis is to illustrate how the construction of their OnlyFans account and the advertisement of it through Instagram contributes to their experiences as a sex worker or individual within sexual labour, and how these experiences may alter current understandings of sex work. My findings demonstrate that how often and what creators post affects the growth of their Instagram account and the relationship that creators have with their fans and followers. For seven days, I observed 10 creators that were different from the creators I interviewed. Each day, I recorded the number of posts they made and their follower and following count. A comparison between day one and day seven is shown in tables one and two below. When observing their content, I recorded notes on their posts and stories, and after the observation period, I identified themes amongst the posts and captions. From these sources, key themes emerged related to links, photo aesthetics, poses, clothing, activity, promotion, reposts, and follower engagement. The components of these themes contributed to the operation and construction of the creators’
Instagram accounts, which affected the formation of the relationships between creators and their fans and followers. The components of the themes also contributed to how their followers view the creator and their OnlyFans content, as evident in the brief discussion of the comments on creators’ posts.

### Day 1

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*Table 1: Creator's Instagram Account Statistics*

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*Table 2: Creator's Instagram Account Statistics*

**Link**

Instagram has a feature that allows users to include a link to another website. However, due to the risk of shadowbanning, creators often include a link to a personalized page that contains all of an individual’s links, including their OnlyFans. Shadowbanning is described as
“the partial censorship of online accounts without the knowledge or consent of the user.” In recent years, applications such as Instagram, Twitter, and Tik Tok have come under scrutiny for the controversies surrounding the shadowbanning of users, but all platforms vehemently deny its existence. It has been noted that activists, performers, artists, and OnlyFans creators who make adult content often experience shadowbanning, where women are largely affected. Instagram explains that the platform does not allow nudity and asks users not to post nudity. Shadowbanning on Instagram involves “rendering a user’s hashtags undiscoverable, restricting account visibility to followers only (as opposed to the broader Instagram community), preventing the account handle from auto-populating in the search bar, or filtering posts out of the feeds of followers,” where the account owner does not notice these changes. As a result, users’ content and accounts experience reduced engagement. In the interviews, Joelle explained how she is search suggestion banned on Twitter, where her activity such as using hashtags or tweeting replies will not show up in the search. She elaborates that Twitter has permanently flagged her account as containing sensitive content, which she describes as frustrating, as it limits engagement with her tweets and prevents them from going viral. However, Joelle also noted that creators could get banned by the service that hosts all of their links, such as Linktr.ee, which is why she also uses a domain routing service. The worries and effects of shadowbanning are

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289 A search suggestion ban is similar to shadowbanning, where users do not populate in the search, and can only be found through mentions or threads that they are in.
discouraging for users who are encountering new barriers in an online world of sex work. With social media and the features that each platform has, it allows creators to advance the business side of their account, by quickly taking users directly to the service or product that they are offering. The link features make it easier for consumers to view and subscribe to the creators’ OnlyFans, while providing creators with a sense of assurance that their links will be present, and their accounts protected.

Photo Aesthetic

Across my sample, there was a high degree of variation in the photos and videos in terms of location, although when creators took images in their homes, they were often posing on a bed, on chairs or couches, in the bathroom, or outside. Some photos had dim lighting to enhance the seductive sexual aesthetic, whereas other creators’ photos were always taken in low light, with poor photo quality compared to other creators’ photos. Interestingly, while the photo quality may have inhibited follower engagement with the post due to the difficulty in viewers seeing the creator, areas of their body, and specific elements of the photo, it also emphasizes the amateur porn aesthetic that is often associated with OnlyFans creators who sell sexually explicit content, as identified by Christopher Persaud, and Cardoso and Scarcelli. As Persaud explains, the amateur appeal of content on OnlyFans is in part due to the recording, editing, and producing of the content, which is in contrast to traditional pornography studio productions. Cardoso and Scarcelli corroborate Persaud’s point, by noting that some of the creators in their study acknowledged that they create amateur videos, due to the lighting, scenography, and editing that

is employed to create the content for their OnlyFans account. In many of creator J’s photos, it was clear that they were holding their phone to take the photo themselves, whereas the other creators likely used tripods, ring lights, or photographers to take the photo and improve the photo quality. While higher-quality photos may be more aesthetically pleasing to the eye, there is an appeal to many followers and fans for amateur porn photos and videos, as they can appear more casual, authentic, and less of a production. The lesser quality photos that were sometimes posted demonstrate that creators do not need to be professional, and it is not required to have significant production to create the content.

Pose

Often, these creators posed in a sexual manner, thus maintaining a connection between their selves on Instagram and OnlyFans. Throughout my data, creators would usually pose seductively, either looking directly at or away from the camera. Creators F and J intentionally did not show their face in any photos or would partially show their face, whereas the rest of the creators were less secretive and revealed their whole face. Due to the stigma and criminalization that many individuals within sex work or sexual labour experience, this finding reveals that creators F and J may be concealing their faces as a form of anonymity to prevent their identity from being exposed, and to keep their OnlyFans semi-private. To augment this finding, in the interviews with the other group of OnlyFans creators, Mia explained that when she first created her OnlyFans, she did not reveal her face as she wanted to remain anonymous and not jeopardize future employment. Although Mia has since later revealed her face, her experience demonstrates that creators may be having an anonymous account, with potentially an alias to further protect their identity.

292 Cardoso and Scarcelli, “(Digitized) Body,” 110.
When posing, creators would often place their hands on intimate areas or would pull on pieces of their clothing to reveal more of their bodies. Creators would position their bodies to emphasize a certain body part, as they were using the body part as the focal point to increase their engagement with the photo and the comment section. Specifically, creator H would post videos of them dancing or twerking to emphasize their backside, with the comments applauding them for their skills, while wishing to see more. Creators would often take selfies or mirror photos, in which these photos required less posing, but still allowed the creator to show off their clothing and specific areas of their body. While selfies and mirror photos are a dominant aesthetic choice for users that may not be an OnlyFans creator, the posing approach of creators was to pose in a manner to not reveal everything, but to still tease viewers, as they wanted to persuade followers to subscribe or continue to subscribe to their OnlyFans.

Previous research has discussed how when social media creators who partake in sexualized labour promote their own products that are directed towards women, they appeal to the male gaze instead through porn chic aesthetics. These creators, often posing in a manner to place certain areas of their body as the focal point, are appealing to the heterosexual porn trope, even though the products promoted may not appeal to all viewers. While this previous research explained that creators marketed their own products when appealing to the male gaze, it can still be applied to OnlyFans creators, even if they may not be promoting their own or someone else’s products, as the male gaze is still a focus through the poses and emphasis on areas of their body, even if their audience is not just male. The majority of the content that creators posted placed certain body parts as the focus of the photo, while posing and wearing clothing to accentuate their bodies.

294 Drenten, Gurrieri, and Tyler, 58.
Similar to Instagram influencers, OnlyFans creators are working to gain and maintain fans and followers. As such, creators must post content to entice users to continue to follow or subscribe and engage with the content. My analysis showed that creating content that centred around the male gaze generated considerable engagement through the comments and follower count. Given the number of types of posing demonstrated in this sample of OnlyFans creators, it is also clear that they conform to what Joanne Entwistle and Elizabeth Wissinger describe as a type of aesthetic labour, “where the look and appearance of the body is critical to the labour,” since the focus of the body is the main commodity, thus making the body “arguably greater than in service work.” My analysis showed that aesthetic labour is a large component of the content and after creators posted content and posed in sexually suggestive ways, they saw an increase in followers and engagement with the photo, which was likely attributed to the aesthetic labour. For instance, Creator H posed in a tight body suit that distinctly outlined their lower intimate piercing, with many comments pointing it out. After making this post, they gained approximately 5,000 followers within 24 hours, which is a significantly higher increase than creator H experienced compared to previous days. Although creator H also posted various stories, the stories were similar to other days and creator H did not experience as significant of an increase in followers on those days. However, certain stories could contribute to the increase in followers, such as through giveaways or contests, where the creator requires users to follow them to have a chance to win. While all the creators included in the visual analysis experienced an increase in followers, not all were as drastic as creator H. Creators D and E saw the second largest

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296 Details of follower counts for creators B, C, and G were not listed on Instagram, as their follower count was in the millions and Instagram does not provide specifics for followers once they reach one million followers.
increase in followers between days 91 and 90 respectively, whereas most of the remaining creators experienced significantly less, decreased, or had roughly the same amount of followers between days. By constructing their photo and using their body as the main commodity to appeal to the porn chic aesthetic and porn trope, creator H proved that an increase in engagement follows when these aspects are at the forefront of the content.

Clothing

Despite the creators selling sexually explicit content, they did not always wear provocative clothing in their Instagram posts. In some photos, creators would wear casual, everyday clothing, or would appear more dressed up, depending on the activity that they were doing that they were wanting to show viewers. However, if they made a post to promote their OnlyFans account, then they would often wear revealing clothing as they were using these photos to entice viewers to subscribe to their OnlyFans to see more explicit content. These posts also offered a free glimpse to followers into the type of content that they post on their OnlyFans. In such photos, creators would typically wear as revealing or minimal clothing as Instagram would allow, including matching lingerie sets, low-cut tops, tight clothing, or sheer or see-through clothing. In photos and a caption, Creator D referenced their other job as a nurse by wearing their work uniform, but then revealed lingerie underneath. This style of photo also allowed their followers to get to know more about them while normalizing their work as a content creator who also has a non-sexual labour job. Creator D’s reference to their job could work to the alleviate stigma of individuals in sex work or sexual labour who are also in “normal” jobs, by showing that one can be in both forms of labour. As these creators engage in sexual labour, their clothing, or lack thereof, plays a large role in this labour and their sexualized aesthetic.
Activity

A key finding from this analysis is that OnlyFans content creators use Instagram to share different elements of their lives. Creators often posted videos or pictures on their stories or made posts of them doing activities such as running errands, going on date nights, beach outings, gym sessions, or hanging out with friends. In some of the photos or videos shared, the creator did not appear in them or if they did, they were not the focal point, as the creator was more focused on sharing the activity or event. Some creators also spoke in the videos of them doing the activity to explain what they were doing or where they were going, in which this could be viewed as a mini vlog. Many creators used the story feature to keep viewers up to date with their lives. By giving followers a glimpse into the activities that they took part in, it allowed followers to get to know them more by learning about the typical activities that they do, the places that they go, and their close acquaintances. Further, by showing their followers their daily activities, in many ways, it allowed followers to feel as if they are there with the creator and also partaking in the activity. This type of content that creators posted blurs the line between influencer and sex worker and further distinguishes direct from indirect and online sex work. In some ways, it parallels the work of other influencers who also share similar types of daily life content with their followers, while distinguishing them from direct, in-person sex workers whose personal lives are not as available to their clients. Additional details about influencing are provided in the following section below. By “normalizing” the lives of sex workers, the content provided on Instagram may contribute to the destigmatization of sex work.

Although most of the activities did not relate to their OnlyFans and the type of content that they post on that platform, the data from my analysis has demonstrated that creators enjoyed sharing parts of their life not related to their OnlyFans. For instance, creator C shared several
stories of them at the gym or socializing, and by sharing this “different” content, creators were able to provide a behind-the-scenes look at their life that many escorts are unable or unwilling to share with their clients. For sex workers such as pornstars or those in camming, many individuals already share elements of their lives with their viewers and through their content. With the shift to online sex work, individuals are now able to converse with their viewers, often in real time. With cam models, rather than only performing erotic acts online, they sometimes discuss different topics with their customers, while still obtaining money from them. Moreover, within camming chat rooms, customers often talk amongst and get to know one another, which can be recognized as communal bounded authenticity, due to the shared intimacy between customers that is often not present within other forms of sexual labour. While sharing personal content as a sex worker with their clients may not be new, the analysis demonstrates how sharing of personal details may now occur through other manners such as social media. This opportunity provides value to both sellers and clients, as both can benefit from the sharing of this content. While creators may not be talking to their followers and fans in-depth, these posts still allowed their followers to get to know them to a greater degree than in previous non-digital-based iterations of sex work. Arguably, clients of many businesses increasingly want to know about the business or the individual that they are giving their money to and working alongside. As such, fans likely want to continuously learn about aspects of the creator that they are subscribing to, to feel closer to them. As people are paying for a connection and may also want to know that the creator is real, by sharing aspects of their life, the creator can solidify the desires and needs of the fan.

Promotion

Many influencers, celebrities, and businesses will promote or ask users with large followings to promote a product or service. In addition to selling their services on OnlyFans, OnlyFans creators with larger followings also posted about products and services that they received from businesses and encouraged followers to purchase the product or service. Creators often received jewellery, beauty products, clothing, and lingerie, with some creators promoting Botox and dental businesses or restaurants and establishments after receiving services from and attending these places. These promotions show that these individuals within sexual labour are essentially brand ambassadors for products that are not necessarily sex related. While influencers or celebrities may also be brand ambassadors for similar products, the use of OnlyFans creators as these brand ambassadors demonstrates that they are provided with opportunities to branch out and advertise for products or services that may not be associated with their OnlyFans content. To further promote the business, creators often offered giveaways for followers to attempt to win the promoted items. Many times, these giveaways required the individual to follow the creator and the business, like and comment on the post, and reshare the post. These requirements are not only easy for followers to complete but are also an easy method for the creator to gain followers and increase their engagement with their account through the post. Many creators also offered giveaways for free monthly memberships to their OnlyFans account. Given that this study was conducted around Valentine’s Day, creator G had made several posts to promote Valentine’s Day lingerie and the company. This promotion demonstrates that creators may be more likely to wear certain clothing around holidays or special events and promote businesses that specialize in products for the occasion.
The popularity of social media demonstrates that businesses and users are expanding their accounts through these business deals and relations. These promotions show that brands and businesses of all kinds are willing to work with sex workers or individuals that engage in sexual labour. These promotions demonstrate that sex sells and that it may be coming less taboo through these business collaborations and the frequency of these promotions. It is hopeful that those who view sex work or sexual labour negatively may begin to view it positively if they see how everyday businesses and establishments are eagerly working with these individuals. This then contributes to the de-stigmatization of sex work, as businesses are treating this work as any other form of legitimate labour.

**Follower Interaction**

When making a story or a post, creators would usually include a brief caption to further engage with their followers. In some cases, there was no caption, or the captions were not always sexual but would relate to everyday elements such as the weather, the day of the week, or their mood and feelings. However, a majority of the time, the caption was a sexual innuendo to further tease their followers. Creators would use a play on words or clichés for their captions, such as “happy hump day,” “do you like the view,” or “sex-er-cise.” The pose or location of the photo sometimes influenced the caption, as creators would sometimes make a sexual reference to the location to further entice followers to engage with the photo. For example, when creator E posed on their bed, the caption related to wanting a follower to join them, in which this engagement with their followers sparked significant interest in the comments. Some creators would relate the caption to their clothing or lack of clothing, as another method to intrigue creators. To increase the reach and interaction of their photo, creators would use hashtags related to the photo or physical characteristics of themselves, with some of the hashtags referencing OnlyFans. Some
captions would ask a question to evoke followers to answer, such as what photo they liked best or how their day was, which would increase their comments and engagement with the photo. Some creators would respond to some of the comments by thanking the follower or replying with emojis, even if they were from fans and did not know them personally. Many creators would also ‘like’ the comment to acknowledge what the follower typed. Followers would typically comment emojis such as flames, a peach, lips, hearts, or variations of emojis with hearts. Followers’ comments would regularly show appreciation or love for the photo and the creator, with some commenters giving their approval of the photo while complimenting them on their body and looks. Although the comments were generally positive, some comments expressed disappointment and frustration. Such comments included wanting more revealing photos, expressing frustration about the creator never replying to their comments, and that their OnlyFans monthly fee is “crazy” based on their amount of followers and fans. Creators frequently received spam comments from OnlyFans shoutout and promotion pages, or from individuals telling the creator to check their dm’s to get spoiled, inferring that the account could be a sugar daddy or sugar mama, or may be an account looking to give them additional money.

Unlike street-based or indoor sex work where it is difficult or impossible for sellers to promote their work on social media due to the laws criminalizing sex work, the visual content analysis of OnlyFans creators demonstrates their ability and willingness to use Instagram to interact with their followers and fans and advance the relationships between clients and sellers. As the creators can quickly reply to fans’ comments and possibly direct messages, it allows the clients to feel instantly connected to the creator. Furthermore, by the creator using specific captions to engage with followers through questions or references, it enables followers to communicate in means beyond typical compliments and emojis. However, these new capabilities
to interact with clients and potential clients may lead to possible downsides for creators that are similar to other, less public, online forms related to escorting, such as rating boards. Followers can now publicly, immediately, and constantly give feedback or criticisms to the creator, which could influence how other followers view them.

My data from the analysis demonstrated that many creators posted every day or almost every day while making several posts and stories throughout the day, likely to maintain their account and relationship with their fans. These ways to communicate and grow their OnlyFans account through Instagram may also be more straining on the creator, due to the demands of having to constantly and consistently like comments, reply to comments and messages, and post content. As many creators discussed in the interviews, they experienced extreme fatigue from having to consistently post and communicate and engage with their fans and followers, where their work negatively affected their life off of the platform and in their personal relationships. Similar to the creators from the interviews, the creators from the visual analysis are employing surface acting and deep acting, but as creators are communicating and interacting with fans off of the OnlyFans platform, the emotional labour may be greater, due to the additional manners that interaction can take place. Moreover, through the manner that creators interact with their fans on Instagram, it is a sort of aesthetic and emotional labour that arguably distinguishes this sexual labour from other forms of sex work. The visual content and interview analyses further demonstrate that being an OnlyFans creator is laborious and there is a significant amount of effort and time that must be put into the account each day to maintain their fans and generate new fans.

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300 Hochschild, *Managed Heart*, 36-38.
Concluding Thoughts

The visual content analysis offered a unique outlook into the lives of OnlyFans creators off the OnlyFans platform. The visual content analysis sought to understand how OnlyFans creators construct their Instagram accounts to further build their name, communicate with their fans, and garner more attention to their OnlyFans account. With the emergence of influencers or people attempting to gain a significant following or fan base on social media, the concept of ‘microcelebrity’ has materialized. Microcelebrity is defined as a “style of online performance that involves people ‘amping up’ their popularity over the Web using technologies like video, blogs and social networking sites.” Microcelebrities “strategically formulate a profile, reach out to followers, and reveal personal information to increase attention and thus improve their online status.” Although a microcelebrity may sometimes look like a conventional celebrity, the two types are different, as a “Hollywood celebrity turns on questions of reality versus image.” In Feona Atwood’s article, she discusses the alt-porn website, SuicideGirls, where for a monthly membership fee, subscribers could access various content such as videos, picture sets, journals, and blogs, and interact with other SuicideGirls members within the chat rooms and webcams. Atwood briefly discusses comments that members may receive on photos, such as compliments, explaining how members of the SuicideGirls community may be both a pornstar and microcelebrity, due to the fascination and even idolization of them for their bodies and pornographic content. Atwood’s connection of SuicideGirls to microcelebrity demonstrates how other individuals within sex work, sexual labour, or those who share pornographic content

303 Senft, Camgirls, 25.
305 Atwood, “No Money Shot?” 447-49.
could be considered a microcelebrity. While not all OnlyFans creators may view themselves as a microcelebrity, the construction of their image and their Instagram account, and idolization by fans demonstrates that many creators fit the definition of a microcelebrity. The definition of microcelebrity can be expanded to apply to these creators who are attempting to increase their subscribers/clients virtually. In the interviews, Margot, who identified her work as sex work, explained that from seeing her number of views and followers, she felt like a mini-celebrity due to receiving and seeing the attention she was getting from fans. OnlyFans creators, as well as other online sexual labour workers, are capitalizing on their bodies virtually, which demonstrates that sexual labour is becoming more digital and accessible to clients. A visual content analysis has revealed OnlyFans creators’ online performance to illustrate how the creators work to increase their subscribers/clients by showcasing their content and life, while simultaneously interacting with their followers, in an attempt to heighten their popularity and virtual status, which in turn, their success is converted onto OnlyFans.

Tables 1 and 2 compare the account statistics of each creator at the beginning and end of the analysis. It is evident that most of the creators who posted more content gained a significant number of followers. Notably, creator H posted seven photos and 23 stories, and gained roughly 11,000 followers, compared to creator K who posted two photos and four stories and only gained 12 followers. However, the analysis also shows that posting often does not necessarily contribute to a considerable follower gain, as noted by follower F, who only gained 10 followers, despite making five posts and three stories. Many creators such as creators C, E, and G did not post often to their home feed but posted more on their stories, as they used the story feature to supplement their lack of posting. My data shows that creators with larger followings posted more content on their stories about their life and less about their OnlyFans. As these creators may not
have to worry as much as creators with smaller followings about building their name and account, they may be more inclined to post more content about their life. Nonetheless, the majority of creators still shared content that was unrelated to their OnlyFans, to build and strengthen the relationship with their fans and followers.
Chapter 7: Conclusion

This thesis contributes to a limited, but growing body of research on OnlyFans, which attempts to provide an understanding of the experiences of OnlyFans creators who sell sexually explicit content. Throughout the thesis, I explored the OnlyFans platform and creators’ experiences and the manner that creators understand their labour, and how their experiences intersect with or diverge from current understandings of sex work. To understand the ways that creators interact with the platform, I conducted nine semi-structured interviews with creators from Canada and the United States as well as a visual content analysis which examined 10 creators for seven days. These methods provided a small, but informative glimpse into the lives of OnlyFans creators and their experiences with the platform and their customers. My analysis revealed that creators who sell sexually explicit content on OnlyFans invariably viewed their work as sex work, which demonstrates that sex work continues to transform, particularly within a digital environment.

To begin to understand OnlyFans and creators who sell sexually explicit content, literature on sugar dating, camming, and gig work were examined to situate OnlyFans creators of sexually explicit content within these other forms of work. The literature on sugar dating and camming illustrates how there are similarities between sugar daters and cammers and OnlyFans creators through their motivations and client interactions. Gig work demonstrated how the gig economy is an underpinning aspect of OnlyFans, as creators may be using OnlyFans as a form of gig work due to the benefits that gig work can offer, however, creators may also be using OnlyFans solely and in the long-term. By framing OnlyFans to these various forms of work, an understanding of OnlyFans as a sexual labour platform demonstrates how the work by creators
may not necessarily be new, but rather an advancement of forms of sex work that existed prior to OnlyFans, and with the assistance of technology.

To further understand the data collected on OnlyFans and creators’ experiences, the theories of sex-positivity, sexual economics, and emotional labour were discussed. Sex-positive theory demonstrated how OnlyFans creators use the platform’s environment to embrace and explore their own and their fans’ sexuality and sexual interests through the content that is shared, monetized, and consumed. Sexual economics theory illustrates the economic value of the relationship between creators and fans, and the valued goods that are exchanged for sexual content through the seller and buyer interaction. Through an understanding of emotional labour, creators employ surface or deep acting at various times of interaction and exchange of content with fans, to ensure customers’ desires are met.

The interview analysis presented various themes to encapsulate how OnlyFans creators experience and understand their work. The key insight that emerged was that all participants identified their labour as sex work, however, they also viewed it differently from traditional and current understandings of sex work. As their work does not require them to interact with their customers face-to-face or in-person, they are still arousing and pleasuring the customers, where the creators explained that it was sex work, with a heightened emotional relationship involved with customers. However, their labour could also be viewed as modelling due to the content that is created. Consistent with other literature on entering sex work, the majority of creators joined the platform due to financial need, however, creators also joined exclusively to improve their self-confidence. The influence and requirement of technology on the platform contributed to how creators experience the platform and interact with their fans and other creators. Creators expressed various benefits, downsides, and concerns that they see from this work, while also
disclosing various misconceptions that individuals hold against their OnlyFans work. Due to the Bella Thorne incident, creators expressed dismay but also excitement about celebrities joining the platform as it can add competition, but also assist in legitimizing the platform and their work. Creators largely expressed concerns and disappointment with the ban that was later suspended, due to de-platforming which is further targeting and inhibiting sex workers who use the platform, as well as other platforms. There are additional concerns about how creators may be affected in the future, due to the passing of FOSTA-SESTA.

Through the visual content analysis, the observation of the photos and accounts on Instagram revealed several themes that may alter how sex workers or individuals who sell sexual labour are viewed. Many creators offered a glimpse into their lives by sharing personal content, while also sharing as revealing and sexually suggestive of photos as Instagram would allow them to post. Arguably, the goal of these creators was to use Instagram and the features that the platform has to offer to engage with their followers to boost their OnlyFans account. Through the content that the creators posted, they provided followers with a snapshot look at the types of content that they regularly post on OnlyFans. These creators used Instagram to tease their content to arouse and allure their followers into further engaging with the content on the OnlyFans platform.

It is evident that while creators were intersecting with other forms of sex work and sexual labour, they were also diverging from these forms and creating elements of their own. Creators who sell sexually explicit content demonstrate that it is an emerging form of sex work, with many components being aspects of other forms, such as camming and sugar dating. As some creators also viewed themselves as models and their content as modelling, this leads to the question of, is creating sexually explicit content on OnlyFans sexy work or sex e-work? The
responses from creators illustrate that sex work is a transforming term and traditional, as well as some current understandings of sex work, do not fully encapsulate OnlyFans creators and their work.

Limitations

As a non-sex worker, I am cognizant that I do not have a first-hand understanding of sex work. Hence, I am limited in the ways that I interact with sex workers or individuals in sexual labour. Particularly, when reaching out to potential interviewees, I experienced four instances wherein I was not warmly received, or where creators expressed hesitancy about my research. One creator found that I was exploiting OnlyFans creators for my thesis and stated that I made creators out to be a foreign species by wanting to understand them. I sent a follow-up message apologizing and clarifying my research, but they did not respond. Similarly, a second creator found that I was disrespecting them and that they are no one’s science experiment, and they blocked me before I had the opportunity to clarify my research. A third creator was not impressed with the amount of compensation that I could offer them and ended up blocking me. A fourth creator initially expressed interest in my study but asked whether I would be framing sex workers in a negative light, and despite clarifying my research, they did not respond to my email.

These experiences are similar to Natalie Hammond and Sarah Kingston, who encountered participants who were concerned about their research, or had fears of how it would impact them. Following these creators’ responses, I came to recognize that I should have better communicated the intentions of my research, but also that their perspectives stem from legitimate critiques of academia and its use of sex workers for individual advancement. Nevertheless, I continued to contact participants to help build greater awareness about OnlyFans content.

creators’ lived experiences and to clarify misconceptions about them, online sex workers, and whether and how sex work is transforming.

Due to time constraints with conducting this research, the samples for the interviews and visual content analysis were small and are not reflective of all OnlyFans creators and their experiences. Further, all participants were female, where the experiences of males are not represented in this study.

Future Research Recommendations

As OnlyFans is an emerging area of research, research on the OnlyFans platform provides valuable insight into how sex work is changing and how technology is key to the development of new permutations of sex work. Future research should explore a larger sample of OnlyFans creators who sell sexually explicit content. Of the interview participants, all participants identified as female, and 8/9 participants identified as white. As such, there was little gender and racial diversity, and research could benefit from a diverse group of participants.

Of the visual analysis, while no definitive conclusions could be made on gender or race as no demographic survey was used as I did not communicate with these creators, one creator appeared as male and only 2/10 creators appeared as non-white. Moreover, of the creators of the visual analysis, the creators who showed their faces appeared as conventionally attractive women with little diversity in terms of body size. For a visual content analysis, a larger and more diverse sample of OnlyFans creators who sell sexually explicit content, and a longer period of observation should be conducted. Additional research on OnlyFans could benefit from interviewing creators outside of North America, creators who are solely students, and creators

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307 The term White refers to Caucasian, an obsolete classification that was used in error during the recruitment process.
who have engaged in sex work before joining the platform. While only three participants joined prior to COVID-19, researching creators who had been on the platform prior to the pandemic could be insightful to understand how and if they were impacted by the influx of creators who had joined since March 2020. Interviewing fans who subscribe to OnlyFans creators of sexually explicit content can provide further insight into the platform and how fans experience the platform and their relationships with creators. One theme that emerged from the interviews that could be explored further is how creators have management teams to assist with producing content and ensuring their success on OnlyFans. Research could be conducted to understand how these creators sought a management company to assist with their content, relationship with fans, and intensity of the emotional labour experienced. These future areas of research would be useful to compare and contrast these findings to the findings of my study.

This research on OnlyFans and the creators who sell sexually explicit content have provided insightful and valuable information on the sex work industry and how individuals of online content creation experience sex work. The research demonstrated that as sex work and technology develop, so do our understandings of sex work. The traditional understandings of direct and indirect sex work have expanded to digital work, including Internet porn, camming, and OnlyFans content creation. Future work should continue to examine how we conceptualize sex work and how it is experienced by those in the growing and changing industry.
Appendix A: Interview Survey Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Riley</th>
<th>Joelle</th>
<th>Farrah</th>
<th>Mia</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
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<td>What is your gender?</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your sexual identity?</td>
<td>Pansexual</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Pansexual</td>
<td>Pansexual</td>
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<td>What is your race?</td>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
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<td>What is your nationality?</td>
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<td>American</td>
<td>Polish</td>
<td>American</td>
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<td>What country do you currently live in?</td>
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<td>United States</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>United States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your religion?</td>
<td>Spiritualist</td>
<td>Non-religious, raised Catholic</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Spiritual</td>
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<td>What is your age?</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>22</td>
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<td>What is your occupation?</td>
<td>OnlyFans</td>
<td>Online content creator &amp; stand-up comedian</td>
<td>Adult Model</td>
<td>Full-time OnlyFans model/influencer</td>
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<td>What is your highest education level?</td>
<td>10th grade</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>Associate of Arts</td>
<td>Dropped out my senior year of college</td>
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<td>Are you currently in school?</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
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<td>What is your relationship status?</td>
<td>Dating</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
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<td>When did you join OnlyFans?</td>
<td>December 2020</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>June 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How many fans do you have?</td>
<td>5.1k</td>
<td>359</td>
<td>5 paid, 45 free</td>
<td>1,000-2,000/month on my paid page. 10,000+ on my free page</td>
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<tr>
<td>How many hours a week do you spend creating content for and working on your account?</td>
<td>That’s hard to say, it’s very much a full-time day in and day out job</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>20-40</td>
<td>70-80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you promote your OnlyFans account?</td>
<td>Social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok</td>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>Instagram, in-person</td>
<td>Social media- mainly TikTok</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your average monthly OnlyFans income?***</td>
<td>Around $1,500 depending on the month. The lowest is $200 and the highest is $3,000.</td>
<td>$10,000</td>
<td>$60</td>
<td>$20,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Aubrey</td>
<td>Halle</td>
<td>Brynn*</td>
<td>Margot*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your gender?</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your sexual identity?</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>Pansexual</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Pansexual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your race?</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your nationality?</td>
<td>Norwegian and Canadian</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>Canadian</td>
<td>Canadian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What country do you currently live in?</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Canada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your religion?</td>
<td>I don’t have one</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Spiritual</td>
<td>Neo Paganism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your age?</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your occupation?</td>
<td>Social media influencing and modeling</td>
<td>Nanny/content creator</td>
<td>Registered early childhood educator</td>
<td>Technical director (theatre)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your highest education level?</td>
<td>A college diploma</td>
<td>High school diploma</td>
<td>College dean’s honour roll graduate</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree double major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you currently in school?</td>
<td>No I graduated college in 2020</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your relationship status?</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>It’s complicated</td>
<td>In a monogamous relationship</td>
<td>Dating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When did you join OnlyFans?</td>
<td>2021</td>
<td>Summer of 2020</td>
<td>November 2020</td>
<td>2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How many fans do you have?</td>
<td>385</td>
<td>Currently like 20</td>
<td>Currently 47, most amount: 200, free account: 900+ fans</td>
<td>90-100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How many hours a week do you spend creating content for and working on your account?</td>
<td>Every day I am in it for 7-8 hours</td>
<td>Only 5 to 10 hours right now</td>
<td>2-4 hours</td>
<td>1-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you promote your OnlyFans account?</td>
<td>At first I reached out to followers I knew wanted it. Now I post story’s for it and my Reddit</td>
<td>Instagram</td>
<td>Reddit, Twitter, ManyVids, VSCO, free OnlyFans account</td>
<td>Tumblr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Karina*</td>
<td>Shea</td>
<td>Blair</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your gender?</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your sexual identity?</td>
<td>Cisgender bisexual</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>Pansexual</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your race?</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>White</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your nationality?</td>
<td>Canadian</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>American</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What country do you currently live in?</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your religion?</td>
<td>Atheist</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Atheist</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your age?</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>22</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your occupation?</td>
<td>Prefer not to answer</td>
<td>Construction safety admin</td>
<td>Exotic dancer &amp; online content creator</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your highest education level?</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>Sophomore college</td>
<td>College</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you currently in school?</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your relationship status?</td>
<td>In a relationship, non-monogamous</td>
<td>Engaged, married in May</td>
<td>Engaged</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When did you join OnlyFans?</td>
<td>Summer 2020</td>
<td>September 2021</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How many fans do you have?</td>
<td>Around 15</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>100-200</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How many hours a week do you spend creating content for and working on your account?</td>
<td>10-15</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you promote your OnlyFans account?</td>
<td>Twitter and Instagram</td>
<td>Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, promo pages, Twitter</td>
<td>Social media platforms (Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram, Reddit)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your average monthly OnlyFans income?**</td>
<td>$236</td>
<td>$1,200-1,500</td>
<td>$1,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Margot and Karina left OnlyFans in 2020 and 2021 respectively. Brynn is no longer active on OnlyFans as of early 2022, but she still had an account at the time of the interview.

**Income is recorded in USD.
Appendix B: Social Media Recruitment Message Script

Hi!

I am a Master’s student at Carleton University, and I am writing my thesis on OnlyFans. My thesis aims to understand and share the experiences of OnlyFans creators who sell sexually explicit content. This research has been cleared by Carleton University Research Ethics Board A Clearance #116736. If you would like more information or would like to be interviewed, please email me at teresaatkinson@cmail.carleton.ca. To be eligible for participation, you must be at least 18 years of age, speak English fluently, be a North American resident, and have been a creator for at least six months. Please share widely and invite potentially interested parties to contact me directly, but please do not pass on any creator’s contact information to me, unless you have their consent.

Thank you for your time,

Teresa Atkinson
Appendix C: Social Media Recruitment Post/Story

Participants wanted for a study on:

The experiences of individuals who sell sexually explicit content on OnlyFans.

This study aims to understand and share the lived experiences of individuals who sell sexually explicit content on OnlyFans. For the purposes of this study, sexually explicit content is defined as legal content that is intended for the purposes of sexual arousal.

To be eligible for participation, you must:

- Be at least 18 years of age
- Speak English fluently
- Be a North American resident
- Have been an OnlyFans creator for at least six months

Participation in this study involves one pre-interview survey, which will take approximately 5-10-minutes, and one interview via Zoom or telephone call, which will take approximately 60-90-minutes. Interviews will be anonymous.

This project was reviewed and cleared by the Carleton University Research Ethics Board A (Clearance number: 116736). If you have any ethical concerns with the study, please contact the Carleton University Research Ethics Board by phone at 613-520-2600 ext. 2517 or by email at ethics@carleton.ca.

If you have any questions, please contact the lead researcher, Teresa Atkinson, by email at teresaatkinson@cmail.carleton.ca
Appendix D: Demographics and Context Survey

1. What is your gender?
2. What is your sexual identity?
3. What is your race?
4. What is your nationality?
5. What country do you currently live in?
6. What is your religion?
7. What is your age?
8. What is your occupation?
9. What is your highest education level?
10. Are you currently in school?
11. What is your relationship status?
12. When did you join OnlyFans?
13. How many fans do you have?
14. How many hours a week do you spend creating content for and working on your account?
15. How do you promote your OnlyFans account?
16. What is your average monthly income?
Appendix E: Interview Guide

1. How did you become a content creator on OnlyFans?
2. What have been your experiences posting sexually explicit content on OnlyFans?
3. Do you view your work as sex work?
4. (If not) How do you conceptualize your work?
5. (If not or if so) How do you view your work in relation to sex work?
6. What do you feel are the greatest misconceptions about your work on OnlyFans?
7. What appeals to you about creating sexually explicit content on OnlyFans?
8. What do you see as the benefits of being a creator on OnlyFans?
9. What concerns you about creating sexually explicit content on OnlyFans?
10. Have you engaged in street-based or private sex work, exotic dancing, pornography, camming, or any other form not mentioned in the past or present?
11. If you were to stop posting sexually explicit content on OnlyFans, what would you do instead?
12. In comparing this type of work to past roles/jobs that you have had, how has OnlyFans compared to past jobs?
13. How has OnlyFans affected the quality of your life since becoming a creator?
14. (If joined before COVID-19) How do you feel about the influx of creators due to COVID-19?
15. How do you feel about celebrities and influencers joining the platform?
Appendix F: Email Invitation

Subject: Invitation to participate in a research project on OnlyFans.

(date)

Hello,

My name is Teresa Atkinson, and I am a Master’s student in the Department of Law and Legal Studies at Carleton University. I am working on a research project under the supervision of Professor Lara Karaian.

I am writing to you today to invite you to participate in a study entitled “Sex-e-Work: An Exploration on the Rise of OnlyFans as a Space for Sexually Explicit Content.” This study aims to understand and share the lived experiences of individuals who sell sexually explicit content on OnlyFans. For the purposes of this study, sexually explicit content is defined as legal content that is intended for the purposes of sexual arousal.

This study involves one 5–10-minute survey via Google Forms and one 60-90-minute interview via Zoom or telephone call. With your consent, interviews will be audio-recorded, and you have the option of having your camera on or off for the interview. If you choose to have your camera on, it is asked that you change your display name to your assigned pseudonym. An audio and video recording will be saved locally to the researcher’s computer. If you choose to have your camera on, the video file will be deleted immediately. Once the survey responses have been recorded, the link will be destroyed. Once the recording has been transcribed, verified, and de-identified, the audio recording will be destroyed.

While this project does involve some professional and emotional risks, care will be taken to protect your identity. This will be done by keeping all responses anonymized and allowing you to request that certain responses not be included in the final project. You will be given a pseudonym to further maintain confidentiality.

You will have the right to end your participation in the study at any time, for any reason, up until March 31, 2022. If you choose to withdraw, all the information you have provided will be destroyed.

As a token of appreciation, participants will receive one $25USD electronic gift card that can be redeemed from a store of your choice. The compensation is yours to keep, even if you choose to withdraw.
All research data, including audio recordings and any notes, will be stored in password-protected documents and on a password-protected laptop. The recordings will be destroyed after transcription, verification, and de-identification. Research data will only be accessible by the researcher and the research supervisor.

This research has been cleared by Carleton University Research Ethics Board A Clearance #116736

Should you have any ethical concerns with the study, please contact the REB Chair, Carleton University Research Ethics Board A (by phone: 613-520-2600 ext. 2517 or by email: ethics@carleton.ca). For all other questions about the study, please contact the researcher.

If you would like to participate in this research project, or have any questions about the research, please contact me at teresaatkinson@cmail.carleton.ca

Sincerely,

Teresa Atkinson
Appendix G: Informed Consent Form

Name and Contact Information of Researchers:

Teresa Atkinson, Carleton University, Department of Law and Legal Studies
Email: teresaatkinson@cmail.carleton.ca
Supervisor and Contact Information:
Lara Karaian
lara.karaian@carleton.ca

Project Title
“Sex-e-Work: An Exploration on the Rise of OnlyFans as a Space for Sexually Explicit Content”

Carleton University Project Clearance

Clearance #: 116736 Date of Clearance: December 14, 2021

Invitation

You are invited to take part in a research project because you are a creator on OnlyFans who sells sexually explicit content. For the purposes of this study, sexually explicit content is defined as legal content that is intended for the purposes of sexual arousal. The information in this form is intended to help you understand what we are asking of you so that you can decide whether you agree to participate in this study. Your participation in this study is voluntary, and a decision not to participate will not be used against you in any way. As you read this form, and decide whether to participate, please ask all the questions you might have, take whatever time you need, and consult with others as you wish.

What is the purpose of the study?

Currently, there is minimal academic research that has been conducted on OnlyFans. This study aims to explore the platform and the experiences of creators who sell sexually explicit content. Further, the study seeks to understand creators’ motives for joining the platform, and how the platform has affected their lives and views on their work. There was no funding provided for this study.
What will I be asked to do?

If you agree to take part in the study, we will ask you to:
Complete one 5-10-minute survey and participate in a one-time 60–90-minute interview over Zoom or telephone call that will be audio and video-recorded with your consent.
For Zoom interviews, you have the option to turn your camera on or off. If you choose to have it on, it is asked that you change your display name to your assigned pseudonym.
The nature of the requested information is to provide insight into the lives of creators on OnlyFans and their experiences with the platform.

Risks and Inconveniences

We do not anticipate any foreseeable physical risks. There are mild-moderate emotional, psychological, social, economic, and privacy risks. However, the researcher will take precautions to protect your identity. These precautions include providing participants with a pseudonym to keep responses anonymous, allowing participants to request that certain responses or identifying details not be included in the final project, and destroying recordings after they have been transcribed, verified, and de-identified. If a participant appears or communicates to be in distress, counselling services will be referred to them.

Possible Benefits

You may not receive any direct benefit from your participation in this study. However, your participation may allow researchers to better understand OnlyFans and creators who use the site. Participation provides an opportunity to share your experiences with the researcher and readers to understand the platform’s effect on the lives and community of those who use the platform to sell sexually explicit content.

Compensation/Incentives

As a token of appreciation, participants will receive one $25USD electronic gift card that can be redeemed from a store of your choice, which will be e-mailed directly to you upon completion of the interview.

No waiver of your rights

By signing this form, you are not waiving any rights or releasing the researchers from any liability.

Withdrawing from the study

If you withdraw your consent during the course of the study, all information collected from you before your withdrawal will be discarded.
After the study, you may request that your data be removed from the study and deleted by notice given to the Principal Investigator (named above) before March 31, 2022.
Confidentiality

We will remove all identifying information from the study data as soon as possible, which will occur after the recordings have been transcribed and verified.

We will treat your personal information as confidential, although absolute privacy cannot be guaranteed. No information that discloses your identity will be released or published without your specific consent. Research records may be accessed by the Carleton University Research Ethics Board in order to ensure continuing ethics compliance.

All data will be kept confidential, unless release is required by law (e.g. child abuse, harm to self or others).

The results of this study may be published or presented at an academic conference or meeting, but the data will be presented so that it will not be possible to identify any participants unless you give your express consent.

You will be assigned a pseudonym so that your identity will not be directly associated with the data you have provided. All data, including coded information, will be kept in a password-protected file on a secure computer.

"In-session" data, such as the audio, video and chat transcript from the interview, will be stored locally on the researcher’s computer. Operation data, such as meeting and performance data, will be stored and protected by Zoom on servers located in Canada, but may be disclosed via a court order or data breach.

Password protection will be used for any research data that will be stored or transferred.

Data Retention

After the study is completed, your de-identified data will be retained for a period of three years for possible future research use, and then securely destroyed. Data that is retained after the interview will be properly stored and anonymized.

If photographs, videos, or audio recordings are to be used, the participant will not be identified, and their face will be blurred.

New information during the study

In the event that any changes could affect your decision to continue participating in this study, you will be promptly informed.
**Ethics review**

This project was reviewed and cleared by the Carleton University Research Ethics Board A. If you have any ethical concerns with the study, please contact Carleton University Research Ethics Board (by phone at 613-520-2600 ext. 2517 or by email at ethics@carleton.ca).

**Statement of consent – print and sign name**

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. ___Yes ___No
I agree to be (audio/video recorded/photographed …) ___Yes ___No

________________________
Signature of participant

________________________
Date

**Research team member who interacted with the participant**

I have explained the study to the participant and answered any and all of their questions. The participant appeared to understand and agree. I provided a copy of the consent form to the participant for their reference.

________________________
Signature of researcher

________________________
Date
Appendix H: Research Consent Form Script for Oral Consent

Hello, my name is Teresa Atkinson, and I am a Master’s student in the Department of Legal Studies at Carleton University. I am working under the supervision of Professor Lara Karaian.

I would like to invite you to participate in a study titled “Sex-e-Work: An Exploration on the Rise of OnlyFans as a Space for Sexually Explicit Content.” For the purposes of this study, sexually explicit content is defined as legal content that is intended for the purposes of sexual arousal. This study aims to understand and share the lived experiences of individuals who sell sexually explicit content on OnlyFans.

The study involves a one-time Google survey and a one-time interview via Zoom or telephone call about understanding the motives for joining OnlyFans and how the platform has affected creators’ lives and views of their work. With your consent, the interview will be audio and video recorded. For Zoom interviews, you have the option of turning your camera on or off. If you choose to have it on, it is asked that you change your display name to your assigned pseudonym. An audio and video recording will be saved locally to the researcher’s computer. If you choose to have your camera on, the video file will be deleted immediately. Once the audio recording is transcribed, verified, and de-identified, it will be retained for three years. Once the survey responses have been recorded, the link will be destroyed.

We estimate that the survey will take about 5-10 minutes to complete and the interview to take about 60-90-minutes to complete. Your participation in the survey and interview is voluntary, and you may choose not to take part, or not to answer any of the questions. As a token of appreciation, participants will receive one $25USD electronic gift card that can be redeemed from a store of your choice. The compensation is yours to keep, even if you choose to withdraw. If you decide to withdraw after the survey and interview, your responses will be removed if you notify the researcher by March 31, 2022.

We do not anticipate any foreseeable physical risks. There are mild-moderate emotional, psychological, social, economic, and privacy risks. However, the researcher will take precautions to protect your identity. These precautions include providing participants with a pseudonym to keep responses anonymous, allowing participants to request that certain responses or identifying details not be included in the final project, and destroying recordings after they have been transcribed, verified, and de-identified. If a participant appears or communicates to be in distress, counselling services will be referred to them.
We will treat your personal information as confidential, although absolute privacy cannot be guaranteed. No information that discloses your identity will be released or published without your specific consent. The results of this study may be published, but the data will be presented so that it will not be possible to identify any participants. All research data will be saved in password-protected documents, and no hard copies will be made.

You will be assigned a pseudonym so that your identity will not be directly associated with the data you have provided. All data, including coded information, will be kept in a password-protected file on a secure computer.

"In-session” data, such as the audio, video, and chat transcript from the interview, will be stored locally on the researcher’s computer. Operation data, such as meeting and performance data, will be stored and protected by Zoom on servers located in Canada, but may be disclosed via a court order or data breach.

We will password protect any research data that we store or transfer. Your de-identified data will be retained for a period of three years and then securely destroyed. If you would like a copy of the finished research study, please let me know, and I will provide you with an electronic copy.

This project was reviewed and cleared by the Carleton University Research Ethics Board A. If you have any ethical concerns with the study, please contact the Carleton University Research Ethics Board by phone at 613-520-2600 ext. 2517 or by email at ethics@carleton.ca. You can also email me at teresaatkinson@cmail.carleton.ca. You may contact my supervisor at lara.karaian@carleton.ca.

Statement of consent
Do you have any questions about this study or need any clarification?
Do you voluntarily agree to participate in the study? Yes______ No______
Do you agree to be (audio/video recorded/photographed)? Yes______ No______

Date: ______________________
Participant’s Name/Pseudonym/Initials (as appropriate): ______________________

Research team member who interacted with the subject
I have explained the study to the participant and answered any and all of their questions. The participant appeared to understand and agree. I provided a copy of the consent information to the participant for their reference.

__________________________ ______________________
Signature of Researcher Date
Appendix I: Research Consent Text for Online Survey

Name and Contact Information of Researchers:

Teresa Atkinson, Carleton University, Department of Law and Legal Studies
Email: teresaatkinson@cmail.carleton.ca

Supervisor and Contact Information:
Lara Karaian
lara.karaian@carleton.ca

Project Title

“Sex-e-Work: An Exploration on the Rise of OnlyFans as a Space for Sexually Explicit Content”

Carleton University Project Clearance

Clearance #: 116736 Date of Clearance: December 14, 2021

Invitation

We are asking you to complete this survey because you are a creator on OnlyFans who sells sexually explicit content. This survey is being conducted by Teresa Atkinson of the Carleton University Department of Law and Legal Studies (law@carleton.ca) working under the supervision of Professor Lara Karaian (lara.karaian@carleton.ca), 613-520-2600 x 1458.

Objectives and Summary:

The aim of this study is to better understand creators on OnlyFans and their experiences of selling sexually explicit content. For the purposes of this study, sexually explicit content is defined as legal content that is intended for the purposes of sexual arousal. Further, the study seeks to understand creators’ motives for joining the platform, and how the platform has affected their lives and views on their work.

We estimate that the survey will take about 5-10 minutes to complete. Your participation in this survey is voluntary, and you may choose not to take part, or not to answer any of the questions. As a token of appreciation, participants will receive one $25USD electronic gift card that can be redeemed from a store of your choice. The compensation is yours to keep, even if you choose to withdraw. If you decide to withdraw after you submit the survey, we will remove your responses from survey data if you notify the researcher by March 31, 2022. We expect to survey a total of 12 people.
Risks and Benefits:

We do not anticipate any foreseeable physical risks. There are mild-moderate emotional, psychological, social, economic, and privacy risks. However, the researcher will take precautions to protect your identity. These precautions include providing participants with a pseudonym to keep responses anonymous, allowing participants to request that certain responses or identifying details not be included in the final project, and destroying the survey link after the responses have been recorded. If you do feel distress from answering any of these questions, counselling services will be referred to you.

You may not receive any direct benefit from your participation in this study. However, your participation may allow researchers to better understand OnlyFans and creators who use the site. Participation provides an opportunity to share your experiences with the researcher and readers to understand the platform’s effect on the lives and community of those who use the platform to sell sexually explicit content.

Confidentiality and Data Storage:

We will treat your personal information as confidential, although absolute privacy cannot be guaranteed. No information that discloses your identity will be released or published without your specific consent. Research records may be accessed by the Carleton University Research Ethics Board in order to ensure continuing ethics compliance. All data will be kept confidential, unless release is required by law (e.g. child abuse, harm to self or others).

The results of this study may be published, but the data will be presented so that it will not be possible to identify you, unless you give consent. All research data will be saved in password-protected documents, and no hard copies will be made. We will password protect any research data that we store or transfer.

Your de-identified data will be retained for a period of three years and then securely destroyed.

REB Review and Contact Information:

This project was reviewed and cleared by the Carleton University Research Ethics Board A. If you have any ethical concerns with the study, please contact the Carleton University Research Ethics Board by phone at 613-520-2600 ext. 2517 for CUREB A or by email at ethics@carleton.ca.

Implied consent:

By completing the online survey, you are agreeing to participate in the study.

Direct Consent:

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

☐ Yes
☐ No
Bibliography


Lenze, Tylor Ann. “Student Sugar Dating: Sugar Babies’ Perceptions of their Decisions to Begin, Continue, or Desist.” Master’s thesis, Bowling Green State University, 2020,


McCombs, Emily. “‘This Bill is Killing Us’: 9 Sex Workers on Their Lives in the Wake Of FOSTA.” HuffPost, May 17, 2018. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/sex-workers-sesta-fosta_n_5ad0d7d0e4b0edca2cb964d9.


