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LET'S TALK ABOUT SEX (WORK), BABY: WOMEN COLLEGE STUDENTS AND
THEIR EXPERIENCES PRODUCING ONLINE SEX WORK

COURTNEY LYNN EBERSOLE

97 pages

Young college-age women have increasingly been using online sex work as a popular avenue to raise capital. I explored the experiences of women undergraduate students who engage in self-produced sex work online. In particular, this study examines the experiences of college women who turned to the online platform, OnlyFans, a mainstream adult entertainment platform that has allowed many college women to earn an income and fund their university costs, especially during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, by posting explicit pictures and videos onto the OnlyFans platform. This study identifies interpretative narratives used by undergraduate women in the U.S. to make sense of their labor as sex workers within capitalist relations. The goal is to move towards strategies that would combat the capitalist exploitation of online sex work. I conducted this study through online social research methods, collecting fieldnote data and semi-structured interviews of industry participants. The results of the study contribute to contemporary feminist literature and sociological research regarding online sex work.

Findings yield that OnlyFans creators understand the platform to be a site of labor exploitation as depicted through their chronicling of the platform's 2021 plans to ban sexually explicit content. Further results of this study yield that college undergraduate students are

motivated to create OnlyFans accounts out of economic necessity, compounded by increased hardships during the COVID-19 pandemic and the high costs associated with obtaining a college education in the United States. As part of the digital gig economy, unpaid labor is essential to the success of the OnlyFans platform. Creators perform unpaid labor through tasks involved in the content creation process and account promotion across social media platforms. Additionally, OnlyFans creators utilize both surface-acting and deep-acting aspects of emotional labor during the creation of content and while interacting with subscribers. Finally, the virtual community of OnlyFans creators acts as resistance to exploitation within the digital gig economy.

KEYWORDS: OnlyFans, sex work, digital sex work, online sex work, undergraduate students, COVID-19 pandemic, unpaid labor, emotional labor, digital gig economy, exploitation.

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EXPERIENCES PRODUCING ONLINE SEX WORK

COURTNEY LYNN EBERSOLE

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for the Degree of

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Department of Sociology and Anthropology

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EXPERIENCES PRODUCING ONLINE SEX WORK

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C.L.E.

CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	i
TABLES	iv
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION	1
Research Questions / Summary	3
Problem Statement	4
Background	5
Significance and Construction of Knowledge	16
CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW	18
Feminist Paradigms of Sex Work	19
Socialist-Feminism and Sex Work	22
Motivations of Sex Workers	25
OnlyFans and the Digital Gig Economy	28
CHAPTER III: METHODS AND PROCEDURES	30
Sample	30
Data Collection	33
Data Analysis	34
Researcher Reflexivity and Ethics	35
Difficulties with Participant Recruitment	36
CHAPTER IV: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION	39
Motivations for Starting an OnlyFans Business	39
COVID-19 Pandemic	39

Costs of College	41
The Unpaid Labor of OnlyFans Creators	44
Content Preparation	45
Account Promotion	47
Emotional Labor and the Girlfriend Experience	50
Subscriber Interactions and Burnout	52
Managing Stigma	56
Disclosing to Employers	56
Disclosing to Family and Friends	58
Disclosing to Intimate Partners	60
Management of Internalized Stigma	63
OnlyFans Community and Acts of Resistance	65
OnlyFans as a Site of Exploitation	65
Resistance to the Ban	70
CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION	73
Limitations	75
REFERENCES	77
APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM	93
APPENDIX B: SAMPLE INTERVIEW GUIDE	95

TABLES

Table	Page
1. Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants	32

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

“It’s like the girl bossification of sex work” stated an attendee during an informational session I had hosted for my university’s Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Program about the online subscription-based platform, OnlyFans. Conversation quickly turned critical of the popular discourse that frames posting sexually explicit content on the platform as an empowering way for entrepreneurially spirited young women to earn money. The term “girl boss” is credited to the founder of fast fashion website Nasty Gal, Sophia Amoruso, and her 2014 autobiography, titled #GIRLBOSS (Synder 2021). As Amoruso became entangled in controversy after the Nasty Gal company filed for bankruptcy, the once endearing term “girl boss” took on an ironic connotation, particularly amongst young internet users (Synder 2021). Referring to someone as a “girl boss” is a tongue-in-cheek way to call out primarily wealthy white, cis, women for sporting a type of corporate, individualistic feminism that fails to address existing power structures within capitalist relations, such as systemic racism, sexism, and labor exploitation (Mull 2020). Likewise, popular discourse about the OnlyFans platform relies on a neoliberal rationality that ignores the “material conditions that requires individuals to become involved in the sex trade in the first place” while promoting the capitalist interests of the commercial sex industry (Thomason 2021: para. 4).

While sex work has traditionally been shrouded in taboo, top-earning OnlyFans creators are largely celebrated in mainstream media stories for their monetary success. Top-earning creators are typically celebrities and social media influencers, inspiring media headlines such as “Bella Thorne Has Already Made \$2 Million on OnlyFans” from *The Cut*, “Cardi B is on OnlyFans and It’s The Best Thing Since The ‘WAP’ Video” from *Buzzfeed*, and “Bhad Bhabie Says She’s Worth \$50 Million After OnlyFans Success” from *PAPER Magazine*. Amidst the

glamorization, tweets and TikTok videos from non-famous OnlyFans creators soon surfaced that expressed that the success stories of mostly white, cisgender, able-bodied, and already wealthy women were not representative of the vast experiences of sexually explicit content creators. The juxtaposition of reactions from the media and OnlyFans creators to the platform sparked my curiosity and eventually led me to the initial stages of this study. I wanted to move beyond the neoliberal, entrepreneurial discourse which celebrates the commodification of bodies while ignoring systemic power structures. Instead, I wanted to access narratives from OnlyFans creators themselves about the labor they perform as online sex workers and their experiences on the OnlyFans platform.

Notably, the concept of sex work is wide and can encompass endless activities. For the purposes of this project, I am defining it as the exchange of “sexual services, performances, or products” for financial compensation (Sagar et al. 2016); and I define online sex work as sexually explicit content accessed for a monetary fee on a web-based service. Through semi-structured interviews and virtual fieldnotes, I identified interpretative narratives used by sexually explicit content creators to make sense of their labor as sex workers within capitalist relations. I chose to study the experiences of undergraduate women students in the United States profiting from self-produced content on OnlyFans, as they are both subjugated and privileged due to intersecting identities. The goal of this project is to move toward strategies that combat the capitalist exploitation of online sex work. The results of the study contribute to socialist-feminist literature and sociological research regarding online sex work content creation as a site of labor exploitation.

The following Introduction Chapter is broken into several sections. The first section lists the “Research Questions” that guided the formulation of this study. Following the section

containing the research questions, I discuss my motivations for conducting this project in the “Problem Statement” section. I then provide “Background” information about OnlyFans as a platform. I end this chapter by examining ways in which this research project is sociologically significant and contributes to the body of socialist-feminist research on online sex work. Beyond the Introduction Chapter, I provide my theoretical framework and a review of the existing literature. My theoretical framework is composed of feminist paradigms used to conceptualize sex work, while my literature review covers motivations of women entering the sex work industry and situates OnlyFans within the digital gig economy. In the subsequent chapter, I discuss the Methods and Procedures used to answer the research questions of this project. Within this chapter, I include a summary of the characteristics of the research sample and provide an outline of the analysis process for the data collected. Finally, I discuss Research Findings followed by Implications and Conclusions. The appendix section includes a participant consent form and an interview guide.

Research Questions/Summary

The primary research question for this project is as follows: How do women college students make sense of their online sex work experience within capitalist relations? The secondary research questions include: How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the experiences of online sex workers? What types of strategies do online sex workers recommend for combatting capitalistic exploitation of their labor?

Ultimately, creators of adult content understand OnlyFans to be a site of labor exploitation as depicted through their chronicling of the platform’s plans to ban sexually explicit content in 2021. Further results of this study show that college undergraduate students are motivated to create OnlyFans accounts out of economic necessity, compounded by increased

hardships during the COVID-19 pandemic and the high costs associated with obtaining a college education in the United States. Unpaid labor is performed by OnlyFans creators through the preparation involved in content creation and account promotion across social media platforms. Additionally, creators perform emotional labor to generate an ‘authentic’ girlfriend experience for their fans and manage stigma associated with sex work through careful disclosure practices. Finally, OnlyFans creators rely on their virtual community to resist exploitation within the digital gig economy.

Problem Statement

The popular discourse concerning young women posting sexually explicit content on OnlyFans is saturated with entrepreneurial rhetoric informed by a neoliberal logic, focused on individual success stories and personal sexual empowerment. Framing sex work through individualized narratives of empowerment ultimately fails to situate online sex work “within the realm of commodified labour relations” and ignores the ways that labor is exploited (Caradonna 2008: para. 7). Furthermore, neoliberal feminist rationality is uninterested in social justice or mass mobilization that could produce structural and economic changes needed to combat capitalist exploitation (Rottenberg 2018). Additionally, discourse about OnlyFans centers around women who are white, cis-gender, able-bodied and successful on the platform. In doing so, the voices of marginalized sexually explicit content creators are left out of the conversation. Therefore, by entering the voices of undergraduate women sex workers on OnlyFans, I aim to uncover how they make sense of their labor within capitalist relations and move towards strategies that would resist further exploitation.

Background

The research site of this study is the popular online subscription-based platform, OnlyFans, which boasts over 100 million users, 1.5 million content creators, with over three billion dollars being paid out annually from the company to creators as of the year 2022 (OnlyFans 2022). The vision of the founder and former CEO of OnlyFans, Timothy Stokely, was to “develop a site where creators could monetize their content free of advertisers” (OnlyFans 2022: para. 3). Distinguishing itself from free-to-use traditional social platforms like Instagram and Facebook, OnlyFans utilizes a subscription-based model in which the platform essentially functions as a host for paywalled content. Creators retain eighty percent of their total earnings paid to them by their subscribers or “fans,” while the OnlyFans’ company pockets the remaining twenty percent of all user transactions (Bernstein 2019). Beyond the monthly subscription price, creators earn income by charging fans for direct messaging and customized content, collecting tips from fans on posts, and referring new creators to the platform (OnlyFans 2022). Creators may opt to have a “free account” in which fans are charged per individual post and for the ability to join live streams instead of setting a monthly subscription price. The advertisement-free model of the platform and the initial lack of a downloadable app allowed OnlyFans, relative to most social media platforms, to have more liberal content policies, such as the nudity and sexually explicit content that became synonymous with the platform. It is important to note that not all content posted to OnlyFans is sexually explicit in nature, but it is undoubtedly the content posted by sex workers that drove the platform to notoriety.

OnlyFans had steady growth since its inception in 2016, but the platform’s initial success pales in comparison to the growth it saw during the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020. Reportedly, OnlyFans saw “an average of 200,000 users signing up every

day,” between the month of March and April 2020 (López 2020: para. 17). The monumental increase in OnlyFans users coincides with escalated feelings of isolation during the initial months of the pandemic lockdown, compelling many to search for human connection and intimacy online (Jennings 2021). Furthermore, the U.S. saw a decrease in 20.5 million jobs between March and April of 2020 alone (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2022). Industries dominated by women were the most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns. Consequently, women, particularly women of color, lost more jobs than men and needed ways to make up for lost income (Boesch and Phadke 2021). Many women with no sex work experience turned to the increasingly popular OnlyFans platform as a way to generate income by creating and posting sexually explicit content (Uttarapong et al. 2022). In-person sex workers also shifted to digital spaces due to the health risks and economic challenges imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Like many service-industry workers, in-person sex workers experienced a shortage of work due to public health measures implemented to minimize the spread of the virus (Banerjee and Burke 2022). Unlike other workers during the initial months of the pandemic, in-person sex workers were often denied “government financial relief benefits or other labor protections” due to the criminalization of the sex industry (Sanchez 2022: 7).

The founders of OnlyFans are no strangers to profiting from the expanding industry of online sex work and the pandemic as the perfect opportunity to practice “disaster capitalism” (Klein 2007). OnlyFans was founded by British entrepreneur Timothy Stokely, his brother Thomas Stokely, and their retired investment banker father, Guy Stokely (Brewster and Dawkins 2021). *The Times UK* describes Timothy Stokely as “the brain behind a booming gig economy in personalised porn” (Das 2020: para. 1). Before creating OnlyFans, Stokely previously owned the adult performance websites Glam Worship and Customs4You in which “fans could request

videos and pornographers could satisfy their admirers' specific fetishes" (Shaw 2020: para. 8). According to Stokely, Customs4U and Glam Worship allowed him "to gain a much better understanding of how creator-fan relationships worked," leading to the eventual creation of OnlyFans (Stokely as cited in Shaw 2020: para. 11). In 2018, the owner of the popular camming site, MyFreeCams, Leonid Radvinsky bought seventy-five percent of OnlyFans' shares (Das 2020). Like Stokely, Radvinsky has an extensive history with internet pornography, having owned websites throughout the 1990s and 2000s that "advertised access to 'illegal' and 'hacked' passwords to porn sites, including ones that were advertised as featuring underage performers" (Brewster and Dawkins 2021: para. 5). Despite the promises of underaged content on Radvinsky's various websites, the Internet Watch Foundation found that none of these sites legitimately linked to illegal material. Instead, the links "typically went through to similar sites offering more links to free porn passwords or other adult content" and charged these websites for every click brought to them by Radvinsky's links (Brewster and Dawkins 2021: para. 8). As of 2023, Radvinsky continues to be the majority owner and a director of OnlyFans while Stokely stepped down from his role as CEO in December of 2021, replaced by the former chief marketing and communications officer of the platform, Amrapali Gan (Azeez 2021).

While OnlyFans' success grew in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, it also found itself as the topic of heated discussion when an onslaught of celebrities created accounts and subsequently made millions of dollars from the platform. Many sex workers feared that the presence of celebrities would "worsen working conditions on OnlyFans and ultimately displace the sex workers who rely on the platform as their main source of income" (Sanchez 2022: 9). Famous individuals have a built-in following which allows them to corner an already over-saturated market by quickly amassing subscribers and charging hefty amounts for access, taking

subscribers and money away from the creators who need it (López 2020). As Sanchez (2022: 9) explains, “While most people turn to sex work to access the resources they need for survival, celebrities have been accused of treating OnlyFans like a hobby.” The average, non-famous content creator puts hours of work into curating their accounts and generating a following by serving as their own “photographers, marketers, social media managers, accountants, and technical support team members” meanwhile, celebrities can outsource the labor that goes into running a successful OnlyFans account (Dickson 2020b: para. 6). Some creators were hopeful that celebrities posting explicit content on OnlyFans would procure publicity and ultimately help normalize digital sex work by “demystify[ing] an industry that tends to operate in the shadows” (Sanchez 2022: 10). However, many non-famous OnlyFans creators reported that their monthly earnings significantly declined after the emergence of celebrity accounts (López 2020). This is largely because the name recognition of celebrities “instantly catapults them to the top creator spots and draws attention away from other creators” making it nearly impossible for non-famous OnlyFans creators to compete for subscribers (Safaei 2021: 34).

Furthermore, OnlyFans underwent a series of policy changes following the actions of celebrity content creators that ultimately caused harm to their non-famous creators. Bella Thorne, a former Disney-channel star turned social media influencer, is said to be the catalyst for many of these policy changes when she created an OnlyFans account in August of 2020. Thorne charged her subscribers twenty dollars per month to view her account, earning her one million dollars the day her account launched and two million dollars by the end of her first week (Gold 2020). Thorne’s celebrity presence on OnlyFans and large payout initially garnered criticism, as creators believed her involvement with the platform was disingenuous and overall harmful to the sex worker community (Kaufman 2020). The backlash worsened when Thorne sent out a 200-

dollar pay-per-view picture of herself in lingerie via messages to her subscribers instead of a promised nude photograph (Kaufman 2020). Upon opening the photo, subscribers reported that they had been scammed and demanded OnlyFans for refunds. A week after the incident, in an event that representatives claim is “unrelated to any single creator,” a series of policy changes were quickly adapted to the OnlyFans platform (Sanchez 2020: 9). In these policy changes, creators were informed that pay-per-view content would be limited to fifty-dollar charges and fans could no longer provide tips larger than one-hundred dollars, both of which had no previous pricing cap (Sanchez 2020). Additionally, creators would no longer receive weekly payments of their earnings and instead would receive their earnings once a month. Despite claims from OnlyFans representatives that there was no connection between Thorne and the policy changes, creators on the platform remained unconvinced. OnlyFans creators took to social media to voice their anger to Bella Thorne for her actions and to the OnlyFans company, noting that these policy changes were especially harmful to the majority of non-famous creators that were living paycheck-to-paycheck (Sanchez 2022).

Creators worried whether the changes in OnlyFans’ payment policies were indicative of the company’s desire to entirely push sex workers off the platform. This fear is derived from a pattern known as “digital gentrification,” where tech companies build their user-bases and revenue from the content posted by sex workers and then subsequently kick sex workers off the platform once a large user-base is established (Vlerick and Va Hove 2021: 11). Tumblr and Patreon are examples of platforms that had reputations of being “sex worker friendly,” only to turn around and eventually ban all sexual content from their sites (Vlerick and Va Hove 2021: 12). This history left many creators worried OnlyFans would be the next ‘sex worker friendly’ platform to abandon sex workers after their presence had made the website widely successful.

OnlyFans had always distanced itself from the sex workers on its platform, choosing to only promote safe-for-work creators on the official company website such as chefs and fitness experts (Jennings 2021). The platform further separated itself from sex workers on August 17, 2021, by launching a downloadable app, OnlyFans TV (OFTV), where sexually explicit content would be prohibited due to regulations put forth by Apple's and Google's respective app stores. The creation of the OFTV app is speculated to be a rebranding strategy that would allow OnlyFans' to fashion itself as a platform for all types of creators, including home bakers, fitness instructors, social-media influencers, musicians, and comedians, in order to move beyond its pornographic reputation (Shaw 2021). Others worried that even if OnlyFans intended to keep sex workers on the platform, the attention it was gathering from anti-sex work groups would eventually lead to the company being forcibly shut down by financial or legal intervention (Vlerick and Va Hove 2021).

Unfortunately, the fears expressed by OnlyFans creators came to fruition on August 19, 2021 when the platform announced that it would be banning sexually explicit content by October 1st of the same year (Barry 2021). Gustavo Turner (2021b: para. 4-5) of *XBIZ*, reported the following statement from OnlyFans:

Effective 1 October, 2021, OnlyFans will prohibit the posting of any content containing sexually-explicit conduct. In order to ensure the long-term sustainability of the platform, and to continue to host an inclusive community of creators and fans, we must evolve our content guidelines. Creators will continue to be allowed to post content containing nudity as long as it is consistent with our Acceptable Use Policy.

These changes are to comply with the requests of our banking partners and payout providers.

Timothy Stokely explained in an interview that banks were refusing to process payments from OnlyFans to content creators due to the "reputational risk" associated with doing business with the sex industry (Nilsson 2021: para. 4). This is not a new development, as payment

intermediaries have “have systematically targeted both legal and illegal sexual expression for the past two decades” (Beebe 2022: 141). Banks, credit card companies, and online payment platforms consider sex work to be a ‘high risk’ industry because of the increased rate of customer “chargebacks” compared to other industries. A chargeback happens when the “purchaser disputes a payment and demands their money back,” in which the *acquirer* (a.k.a. the financial institution) will be responsible for the refund and thus lose profit (Beebe 2022: 144). Low-risk businesses typically have “less than 1% of their sales result in chargebacks,” whereas the rate of chargebacks for legal adult-service merchants may be as high as four percent (Beebe 2022: 145). The social stigma surrounding sex work is part of the reason the industry has a higher rate of chargebacks; purchasers are more likely to dispute charges on platforms like OnlyFans to avoid being linked with an industry shrouded in shame and questionable legality (Beebe 2022).

The precarious relationship between the sex industry and the financial sector is further strained due to the onslaught of media stories investigating “the prevalence of child pornography and other non-consensual footage on so-called tube sites” (Nilsson 2021: para. 10). One such media story that garnered much attention and criticism is “The Children of Pornhub” by Nicholas Kristof, published in December 2020 for the *New York Times*. In the opinion piece, Kristof urged banks and credit card companies to suspend their cooperation with Pornhub due to the existence and monetization of child abuse and non-consensual media on the platform. Additionally, politicians and state governments were called upon to enforce censorship legislation against Pornhub (Turner 2020b). Sex workers and sex work activists criticized Kristof’s recommendations of financial strangulation and state censorship as they echo the demands made by religious anti-porn groups (Turner 2020b). Within days of Kristof’s publication, Mastercard and VISA pulled their services from Pornhub and all other adult-entertainment platforms owned

by the Mindgeek conglomerate. This move put the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of performers at risk during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially the most marginalized such as People of Color and trans performers (Jones 2020). Mastercard later announced they would be enforcing stricter guidelines for all merchants of adult content — effective as of October 2021—the same month OnlyFans would enact the ban of sexually explicit content from the platform (Webber 2022).

The Free Speech Coalition (as cited in Adams 2021: para. 3), a trade association for the adult entertainment industry, explains that the failing of companies like Mastercard to “stand up to a misguided and ill-intentioned evangelical War on Porn” are at fault for the OnlyFans sexually explicit content ban. The so-called “War on Porn” is largely led by religious, anti-porn lobbyist groups, whose agenda is to “shut down, by whatever means necessary, online porn” (Turner 2021a: para 7). Anti-porn groups understand that “banks and credit card companies are risk-averse institutions, easily scared by potential bad publicity” and thus target them as accomplices in the quest to abolish sex work (Free Speech Coalition as cited in Adams 2021: para. 3). For example, the National Center on Sexual Exploitation (NCOSE), formerly known as Morality in Media, has long lobbied for major credit card companies to pull their services from all merchants of adult entertainment platforms, stating in mass emails to the heads of credit card companies that “processing payments for erotic content is tantamount to ‘aiding human rights Violations [sic]’” (Turner 2020a: para. 8). In 2022, NCOSE turned their attention to OnlyFans and added the platform to their list of companies that they consider major contributors of sexual exploitation (Burke 2021). Sharing on their website that “According to federal law (FOSTA-SESTA) it is illegal for websites to knowingly facilitate prostitution or sex trafficking. Call on the Department of Justice to investigate OnlyFans and call on financial institutions to sever ties

with OnlyFans” (NCOSE 2022: para. 31). FOSTA (Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act) and SESTA (Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act) represent congressional bills that became law in 2018.

A little over a week prior to OnlyFans’ announcement of the ban on sexual content, Republican Representative Ann Wagner of Missouri sent “a letter with over 100 signatures to the Department of Justice urging the attorney general to investigate OnlyFans.com for criminal activity” (Burke 2021: para. 10). Research from NCOSE was used to “accuse [OnlyFans] of lacking sufficient safeguards to protect against child abuse, sex trafficking, and sexual exploitation” (Sprayregen 2021: para. 8). Any indication of sexual exploitation needs to be taken seriously and properly investigated, however, it is a purposeful tactic of the anti-porn movement to leverage genuine concerns over sexual exploitation to further their agenda of eradicating all forms of sex work. For example, groups like NCOSE use “‘trafficking’ as an umbrella term for all sex work, including that which is legal and consensual” to attract broad public support for their cause (Burke 2021: para. 13). A moral panic about sex trafficking has largely been created by the “media, politicians, activist organizations, and religious groups” with little consideration of the complexities of human trafficking (Russo 2020: 319). Prostitution and human trafficking are often conflated, resulting in fallacies such as “The person selling sex *must* be exploited. The person selling sex *must* be voiceless. The person selling sex *must* be rescued” which are then “purposely injected into human trafficking discourse to demonize sex work” (Russo 2020: 320). The moral panic generated about sex trafficking is easily manipulated into votes for politicians who create prohibitionist legislation against sex workers and funnel federal funds into law enforcement (Clarke 2021).

One such piece of prohibitionist legislation is the highly controversial Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act and the Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act (FOSTA-SESTA), co-authored by Representative Wagner before she turned her attention to shutting down OnlyFans. FOSTA-SESTA passed through Congress with bi-partisan support and was signed into law by President Trump in April of 2018. The law intends to “hold ‘bad-actor’ websites accountable, both criminally and civilly, if their platform is designed to facilitate prostitution and sex trafficking” (Russo 2020: 316-17). FOSTA-SESTA expands the current federal prostitution law to include, “own[ing], manag[ing], or operat[ing]” a website “with the intent to promote or facilitate the prostitution of another person” (18 U.S.C. § 2421A[a] as cited in Russo 2020: 330). This means that online intermediaries are now legally responsible “if third parties are found to be posting ads for prostitution — including consensual sex work — on their platforms” (Romano 2018: para. 4). FOSTA-SESTA has been highly criticized by sex workers, sex trafficking survivors, law experts, and social researchers as it “affects already-marginalized individuals, hinders law enforcement’s ability to track down traffickers, and over-censors speech on the internet” (Russo 2020: 331). Websites used by full-service sex workers such as Craigslist Erotic Services, Backpage, and VerifyHim have shut down completely due to liability issues concerning FOSTA-SESTA. These shutdowns are detrimental to sex workers as online platforms are utilized to advertise services, connect with potential clients, and employ safety measures such as screening methods (Russo 2020: 326). While OnlyFans is not designed as a platform to facilitate prostitution, it remains in a dubious position under FOSTA-SESTA as the legislation puts all online pornography at risk (Burke 2021). It is speculated that the OnlyFans company observed how other websites which feature adult content have “been fined, faced pressure from payment partners, or in more extreme cases removed entirely” and decided to move forward with the sexually explicit content ban

(Safae 2021: 41). Rebranding away from sex work and existing as a ‘safe-for-work’ platform removes any risk of OnlyFans being targeted by FOSTA-SESTA (Safae 2021).

OnlyFans’ announcement of the sexually explicit content ban sparked outrage from sex workers and allies alike, largely expressed on social media. Many creators expressed fears that OnlyFan’s decision would drive the sex work industry “back underground – or back on to the street – after losing one of the few sites that allows individuals to earn real money from adult content” (Hern and Watterson 2021: para. 4). It appeared that the OnlyFans platform had built its business from the labor of sex workers and was ready to abandon them for mainstream success as other platforms, like Tumblr and Patreon had done years prior (Hern and Watterson 2021). The announcement of the ban was especially upsetting as it came during a moment of time where it appeared “there was increased respect and empathy for sex workers” in the public consciousness (Bernstein 2021: para. #6). Furthermore, many creators relied on OnlyFans for a living while traditional employment and in-person sex work became precarious due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to expressing their rage at the ban online, many creators took their business from the OnlyFans platform in favor of similar subscription-based platforms that had surfaced (Bernstein 2021).

Six days after the initial announcement that OnlyFans would be banning sexually explicit content, the company backtracked and suspended their plans to enact the ban. The company tweeted the following on August 25, 2021:

Thank you to everyone for making your voices heard. We have secured assurances necessary to support our diverse creator community and have suspended the planned October 1 policy change. OnlyFans stands for inclusion and we will continue to provide a home for all creators. (@OnlyFans, n.p.).

The suspension of the ban came days following the massive outcry from explicit creators on social media. As read in the statement, OnlyFans carefully thanked creators for making their

voices heard but “held back from outright acknowledgment of the importance of explicit content on the website” instead noting that it secured assurances to support its ‘diverse’ creator community (Hern and Watterson 2021: para. 5). Even though the suspension of the proposed ban happened quickly, damage was already done as creators had scrambled to delete content that was in violation of the new policy and move their subscribers to other platforms. Upon hearing the news of the ban reversal, sexually explicit content creators on OnlyFans were left with a difficult decision, “either stick with a partner that grew to bring in billions by hosting content made by sex workers or ditch the partner that looked like it sold them out when things got tough” (Lawler 2021: para. 3). While the suspension of the ban provided momentary relief to many OnlyFans creators, it remains unclear if or when the company may decide to move forward with the ban of sexually explicit content in the future.

Significance and Construction of Knowledge

This project lends itself to socialist-feminist literature on sex work, in which it is understood that “the struggle for sex worker rights must begin with sex work being recognized as labor” and that workers in the sex industry are “entitled to the same labour rights as other workers and the same human rights as other people” (Caradonna 2008: para. 6). Additionally, this research expands the literature on the digital gig economy by situating OnlyFans and the experiences of its creators within it. The findings also illuminate the motivations and experiences of U.S. college students participating in online sex work, a demographic that remains underrepresented in sex work research (Stewart 2021). Furthermore, this study documents a particular moment of the COVID-19 pandemic lending itself to Quick Response Research, i.e., the collection of data in the aftermath of extreme events, disasters, and uprisings before the memories have faded. In doing so, the findings of this study contribute to the literature

concerning the impact of the pandemic on the sex work industry as well as students in higher education.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Social researchers have extensively studied in-person sex work and more recently digital sex work, yet OnlyFans is representative of a new frontier of subscription-based platforms used to access sexual content. When I started this project in the fall of 2020, there was little to read about OnlyFans in the academic sense. Within the past two years, studies focusing on the OnlyFans platform have slowly begun to emerge. For example, Aryana Safaee (2021) produced a political science master's thesis which situates OnlyFans within the digital gig economy while addressing the challenges OnlyFans creators face as sex workers that make their experiences within the gig economy unique. To do so, Safaee conducted six original interviews with OnlyFans creators and consulted pre-existing interviews with creators found through online publications. Another master's thesis that has been helpful while writing my own is Teresa Atkinson's (2022: 6) in law and legal studies, in which she contends that OnlyFans creators borrow "aspects of other areas of online and offline sex work, while also experiencing sex work in new manners." Atkinson interviewed nine OnlyFans creators and conducted a visual content analysis of ten creators. My research corroborates Safaee's and Atkinson's work, while examining the unique experiences of college students as OnlyFans creators and how they make sense of their labor as sex workers within capitalist relations.

I base my theoretical framework around the paradigms revealed by feminist scholars that conceptualize women's participation in sex work. These paradigms historically viewed women engaging in sex work either as empowered free agents or as exploited victims in an inherently patriarchal system. However, a third notion of sex work arose which conceptualizes sex work in a much more nuanced understanding that sex workers exist in a gray area between sexual agency, capitalistic exploitation, and gendered power relations. This project in particular draws

heavily from socialist-feminists' understandings that a study of sex work is incomplete without considering its positionality in a capitalistic society, as "sex work is critical to an analysis of the lived intersectionality of capitalism and patriarchy in individual and collective lives" (Beloso 2012: 50). Additionally, I found it necessary to review literature concerning motivations for engaging in sex work, stipulating that women are primarily motivated both by financial gain and by the sense of autonomy the work promises. An overview of the literature concerning OnlyFans' place within the digital gig economy is also included. There is little information regarding U.S. college student involvement in sex work and the financial impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on students, indicating a gap in the research in which this thesis will aid in filling.

Feminist Paradigms of Sex Work

A review of the literature from feminist scholars concerning sex work has revealed conflicting paradigms of autonomy versus victimization of women in sex work. The split in contemporary feminist perceptions of sex work "largely revolves around a polarized argument that constructs sex work as either exploitative or liberating" (Kissil and Davey 2010: 6). One of the primary points of contention which divides these groups of feminists is the question of "whether prostitutes are coerced victims or entrepreneurs and empowered whores" (ibid.). With bifurcated opinions on the matter, sex work is perceived as either a form of gendered oppression, or as "a distinct occupational sector" in which sex work is viewed as being just as valid as any other form of labor (Olasik 2018: 119). Feminists who conceptualize sex work as gender oppression see it as "something that is done to [women] without their conscious choice" (Olasik 2018: 119). This directly contradicts those who view sex work through an empowerment paradigm, which respects "the sex industry as an actual occupation involving the process of conscious decision-making" (ibid.). Feminists who view sex work as a valid form of work, i.e.,

advocating the empowerment paradigm, believe that “[sex work] involves human agency, and may be potentially empowering for workers” (Weitzer 2009: 215 in Olasik 2018: 119). Recently, there has been an increased popularity amongst feminist scholars who view women’s participation in sex work on a continuum of empowerment and oppression and who consider women’s intersecting identities.

Feminists subscribing to the “empowerment paradigm” frame sex work as a choice made freely through women’s agency and are thus “pro-proponents” of “prostitution”/sex-worker rights, believing that the issue of participation in the sex industry rests on “economic and social inequality more than it does on sexual inequality” (Kissil and Davey 2010: 6). According to the empowerment paradigm, women’s freedom to choose to engage in sex work is linked to equality and personhood, while denying women the opportunity to choose sex work actively “denies her equality and with that her status as a human being” (ibid.). This view is shared by both “feminist sex workers” and “feminist prostitutes’ rights groups” (ibid.). Under the empowerment paradigm, feminists believe sex work restructures Western conceptions of femininity, in which a woman is framed as a “desexualized tool” (Olasik 2018: 121). “The sexualization that a woman recovers” by engaging in sex work actively challenges cultural assumptions of womanhood, even if the circumstances that led her to sex work were unfavorable (ibid.). Feminists who uphold the empowerment paradigm understand that “women are constrained by poverty, job discrimination, and segregation” and may “choose” sex work due to a myriad of these reasons, but they stress the power sex workers hold as they negotiate services, terms, and fees (Kissil and Davey 2010: 6-7). The empowerment paradigm asserts that when feminists only perceive sex workers as victims, they devalue the “possibility of female choice and self-directed action” (Ellis 1984: 442). That is, women can actively choose sex work as a career option by their own agency, and

their participation in sex work is not necessarily a result of oppressive structural forces or individual necessity (or at least: no more than any other individual living in a world of constraints).

While feminists of the empowerment paradigm view sex work as an occupation chosen through a woman's agency, feminists who uphold the oppression paradigm view women involved in the sex industry to be victims who did not come to the "decision" of sex work peacefully. It is believed that a woman's involvement in prostitution is "always nonconsensual," paid rape as it were, due to the dire circumstances that led her there (Kissil and Davey 2010: 8). Under this paradigm, sex work cannot be separated from patriarchy. Radical feminists tend to subscribe to this perception of sex work, viewing sex workers as "victims of the patriarchy, par excellence" (Beloso 2012: 48). The concept of buying sex is closely linked to a "system of heterosexuality and male power" that represents extreme sexual stratification in which the "commoditization of female sexuality contributes to the devaluation and objectification of women" (Kissil and Davey 2010: 8). Under this paradigm, the commercialization of sex is not only seen as a form of violence to the sex worker, "but by extension to all women in society because of the endorsement of patriarchal oppression that it represents" (Sagar et al. 2016: 699). Radical feminists (and some conservatives alike) propose abolishing sex work, as "the oppression of women is valorized and maintained by a pornography industry that shows women acting out their own degradation because men find it arousing" (Ellis 1984: 434). They assert that sex work is inherently oppressive toward women because the selling of women's bodies for the sexual pleasure of men is inescapable in patriarchy.

While there are two primary contradicting feminist paradigms of sex work, a more complex third conception of sex work has arisen. As Safaee (2021: 8) explains the feminists of

this third notion “are not primarily concerned with the moral implications of sex work, but rather how class and economic structures impact sex workers.” Within this paradigm, sex workers exist in a gray area between sexual agency, capitalistic exploitation, and gendered power relations. For example, sex work is a location in which “heteronormativity and rigid gender stereotypes can be both challenged and upheld[... Therefore,] researchers should bridge the gap between the victim/agent binary to see how sex work can be both influenced by discursive power relations and a site of agency” (Smith 2017: 346 in Olasik 2018: 122). The conflicting “empowerment” and “oppression” feminist paradigms in which sex work has been conceptualized are problematic, because they disregard women as sexual beings and dismiss female sexuality as a force in its own right (Jones 2016). Just as with all forms of labor, sex workers will likely experience instances of both “exploitation and job satisfaction” (Jones 2016: 228). However, the dichotomy of ‘agent or victim’ in which sex workers are placed is harmful and incomplete, as it does not account for the fluidity of women’s positionalities (Gabryszewska 2014).

Socialist-Feminism and Sex Work

Socialist-feminists understand that a study of sex work is incomplete without considering its positionality in a capitalistic society, as “sex work is critical to an analysis of the lived intersectionality of capitalism and patriarchy in individual and collective lives” (Beloso 2012: 50). There has been a long-standing reluctance to accept sex work as legitimate labor due to the relationship between sexism, control of women’s sexuality, and the continuation of stigma surrounding sex work (Cruz 2018). However, it is important to keep in mind that sex work is a site of exploitation as it exists as “labor under capitalism” in which sex workers sell their labor power or “the physical and mental activities in producing services” (Berg 2014: 694; Caradonna 2008: 11). Implementing a labor analysis of sex work “removes commercial sexual services from

moralistic and paternalistic arguments that view sex as a fixed, privileged or natural site of human activity and places such activity within the realm of commodified labour relations” (Caradonna 2008: para 5). By analyzing the labor aspect of sex work, we can better understand the needs and experiences of individuals working in this industry and develop strategies to improve their working conditions and protect their rights.

These intersections of capitalist and patriarchal relations can be seen historically, as prostitution flourished under capitalism and the increasing normalization of ‘monogamous’ nuclear families, in which men freely expressed promiscuity while their wives could not (Bhattacharya 2016). In the Marxist view, as with marriage under a patriarchal capitalistic society, sex work is not a “contract between free and equal individuals,” but consists of the submission of women to the ‘need’ of men with capital to expand industry and trade, i.e., the commercial sex industry / sex trade (Bhattacharya 2016: 85). This exemplifies the complexities of sex workers, who are not ‘free’ workers but are enslaved the same as any other laborer under capitalism. Marxism views the wife or the sex worker as selling herself to the owner of capital as any wage-laborer does (Bhattacharya 2016). Neoliberal definitions of sex workers contend that they are “free workers” and are not victims of exploitation, unlike those who have been sex trafficked (Cruz 2018: 66). Marxist feminists do not agree with this conception of the ‘free’ sex worker, instead proposing that sex work exists along a “continuum of capitalist relations of (re)production, which are not purely economic; they are gendered, racial, and legal” (Cruz 2018: 67). This means analysis of sex work must go beyond neoliberal feminist notions of individual career choice and must be understood as a form of gendered labor.

Sex work cannot be understood without first situating it among gendered labor in a capitalist society. A study conducted in Brazil found that women profiting from sex work often

circulate among the “domestic sphere of (re)productive labor (as wives), low paid feminized work in the service sector, and sex work” (da Silva and Blanchette 2017: 33). Reproductive labor refers to the reproduction of labor power, which has become synonymous with women’s unpaid labor inside the home (Duffy 2007). Sex work is often perceived as a form of ‘paid social reproduction’ as it takes place in the private sphere and is seen as unskilled labor (Cruz 2018), though movements for the rights of sex workers have sought to recontextualize “prostitution” as skilled labor. The reluctance to accept sex work as legitimate labor is due to the relationship between sexism, control of female sexuality, and the continuation of stigma surrounding sex work (ibid.). When asked, the Brazilian women who engaged in sex work felt the same about sex work as they had about any other form of wage-labor. They asked, “Since when do you work because you like it?” (da Silva and Blanchette 2017: 34). This illustrates the point that sex work is not exploitative because of the nature of the labor per se, “it is exploitative because it is labor under capitalism” (Berg 2014: 694). A similar sentiment is shared on TheDoe.com (2020: para. 20), in which a seasoned sex worker discusses the intensive emotional labor of self-producing sex work, including “negotiating complicated transactional relationships, payment structures, intimate connections, jealous attachments and conflict.” Scarlett Alliance, the Australian Sex Workers Association (2021), warns sex workers of OnlyFans: “it is also one of the platforms we hear the most complaints about. Be aware that this, and most of these sites, are not run by sex workers and do not have sex workers’ best interests at heart. They are in it for the money.” Women who engage in sex work online face many of the same challenges of workers in more ‘traditional’ jobs outside of the sex industry, along with the dangers that come with being vulnerable on the internet.

Motivations of Sex Workers

In this section, the literature on the motivations of sex workers joining the industry will be explored. A review of the literature concerning motivations for entering sex work has revealed many motivating factors for participating in sex work. To break it down into more digestible categories, women are motivated to participate in sex work due to autonomy and financially driven motivations. Financial motivations play a primary role in sex work, as remuneration for sex work is a pathway to better life opportunities (Sagar et al. 2016). In a study designed to understand the correlation between age of entry and motivations of women and girls soliciting street prostitution, 35% of the adult women interviewed “described their entry into prostitution as a means of survival, in that it served as a necessary way to earn money to eat and pay rent for housing” (Cobbina and Oselin 2011: 323). Financial motivations are not limited to those profiting from ‘direct’ sex work, referring to services in which sexual satisfaction is provided to a client “through direct physical contact of some sort” in exchange for money (Primoratz 2012: para. 1). Sex workers that perform indirect sexual services which “involve little or no genital contact” for a fee, such as exotic dancers, telephone sex operators, and online sex workers also cite financial motivations as a driving force of their choice of occupation (Harcourt and Donovan 2005: 203).

Financial motivations for turning to online sex work has only increased during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Creators are realizing the potential to earn more income from subscription-based platforms than they were in jobs pre-pandemic, whether those jobs were in alternative sectors of the sex industry such as exotic dancing or other industries outside of sex work that contributed to the 29.4 million lost jobs in the U.S. (López 2020). An experienced sex worker shares on a digital publication, TheDoe.com (2020: para 4), that her friends have

increasingly been asking her for advice on how to get into online sex work: “Since the beginning of COVID-19, these messages have been flooding in from people who have lost their jobs and are looking for ‘quick’ and ‘easy’ ways to make ends meet while sheltering-in-place.” However, many participants in prior studies (Atkinson 2022; Jones 2016; Safaee 2021) have pointed out that like other female-dominated professions, online sex work requires physical, mental, and emotional labor and is not simply ‘quick’ or easy money. Hochschild (2013: 6) has defined emotional labor as “the effort to seem to feel and to try to feel the right feeling for the job, and to try to induce the same feeling in certain others.” Seligson (2021: para. 33) notes in her article for the *New York Times* “one of the most valuable commodities online sex workers can offer is something women have typically given away for free: emotional labor or ‘the girlfriend experience’.” Clearly, emotional labor is a requirement of online sex work needed to obtain the desired earnings that drew creators to platforms such as OnlyFans in the first-place.

Unsurprisingly, financial incentives remain a primary motivating factor in deciding to pursue sex work as “women who occupy lower socioeconomic status (SES) have fewer educational and employment opportunities, making it challenging to avoid poverty” (Cobbina and Oselin 2011: 313). Furthermore, the “online sexual gig economy can be a refuge from the discrimination some people face in the nonsexual labor market” such as trans individuals, those with chronic illness or disability, or with criminal records (Jones 2021: para. 9). Historically, research has shown that prostitution is a pathway to income for individuals who are impoverished due to structural conditions (Cobbina and Oselin 2011). Anne, an experienced sex worker, relays a similar sentiment about her introduction to the occupation: “I was bedhopping at the time; so the biggest reason was the same old one: Why give it away when you can make money off it?” (Heyl 1979: 49). Sagar et al. (2016: 700) reported that “taking up occupation in

the sex industry could be appealing to students in the belief that they can secure an income,” as university tuition, costs of living, and student debt continue to rise. University students understand the “lack of money in their lives as a principal motivating factor for working in the sex industry” (ibid.). Even middle-class women are joining the ever-increasing sex work industry, finding the “relatively high pay of the sex industry” compelling in comparison to the “gender disparities of postindustrial economic life” (Bernstein 2007: 475).

In addition to financial motivations, women who participate in sex work rather than traditional employment do so to achieve autonomy and for many reasons. For example, university students in the U.K. appreciate freedom from employment regulations, pleasurable working conditions, flexible work hours, and regular pay (Sagar et al. 2016). Additionally, sex workers online “express clear agency and decision-making power in most work activities, particularly over crucial issues such as when to work and which clients to accept” (Sanders, Connelly, and Jarvis-King 2016: 14). Prior literature also focused heavily on sexual agency as motivation for participating in sex work. For example, survivors of sexual assault explained that their work in prostitution “gave them a sense of empowerment, allowed them to exact revenge, or provided a sense of control over their bodies” (Cobbina and Oselin 2011: 319). For these survivors, “performing sex work gave them a sense of control over their sexuality” (ibid.). Additionally, the sexual pleasure the sex worker derives acts as motivation for posting explicit content online. In a study on camgirls (women who sell interactive computer-mediated sex online), it was found that “models can and do derive sexual pleasure from their work,” with many of them highlighting “orgasms as a benefit of their work” (Jones 2016: 235).

Likewise, Abbott (2010: 58) noted that pornography and sex work offer the opportunity to violate social norms, have sex, and an avenue to explore “norm-violating subcultures.” For

example, Abbott (2010: 58) interviewed actors in straight pornographic films, documenting their work experiences, views of their audience, and how they handle stigma, explaining that “nearly two-thirds of female respondents self-identified as bisexual, although only half of them had had sex with women before entering the sex industry.” Thus, online sex work “opens up new opportunities for human intimacy, sexual encounters, and sexual pleasure” (Jones 2020: 90). For U.K. college students participating in sex work, those who had less direct or financial motivations for joining the industry were more likely to be motivated by intrinsic reasons, “especially sexual pleasure” (Sagar et al. 2016: 711). Sex work allows women to explore sexual identities, experiences, and pleasure in a way that they may not have access to outside of their professional work.

OnlyFans and the Digital Gig Economy

The online gig economy grew exponentially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, as there were “a massive need for services and a growing pool for newly available workers who needed to generate income” (Smith 2021: para. 2). Companies in the gig economy “facilitate transactions between consumers and producers in digital platforms, make work more flexible, provide online payment options from which a significant fee is charged and provide online profiles with the qualities and reputation of producers and consumers” (Pires 2021: 230). When considering companies within the digital gig economy, one may think of popular rideshare platforms such as Uber or Lyft, but OnlyFans fits into the model of a digital gig platform as well. As Safaee (2021: 52) explains, “the creators on the website are independent contractors using OnlyFans to provide subscribers with paid content and in exchange for using their platform, OnlyFans gets a cut.” As with OnlyFans, workers in the gig economy are without fixed income, in which their earnings are dependent upon the quantity and quality of tasks performed (Pires

2021: 230). This gives the illusion of the gig worker being their own boss, in which “the laborer decides which clients they serve, what hours they work, and where they work; the combination of these three factors determine how much money they make” (Safaei 2021: 54). Workers are “framed culturally and legally—as entrepreneurs, as individuals working from and within their own interests” (Cardoso, Chronaki, and Scarelli 2022: 171). Despite the promising notion of what an “entrepreneur” entails, the reality of the digital gig economy is that the majority of profit is accrued by the platform itself rather than the independent contractor.

That said, the labor relations performed on digital gig platforms are linked to the “intensification of work, working day expansion, low remuneration, absence of labor rights, amplification of indirect control over the labor process” (Pires 2021: 229). Additionally, gig workers are alienated from their fellow workers, lack benefits, and are often not reimbursed for expenses required of their work (Safaei 2021). Due to the rating system, gig workers must perform unpaid emotional labor to ensure their clients are happy or risk losing a good rating- i.e., lost income. This is all true of online sex work, in which creators on platforms such as OnlyFans do not receive benefits, such as “employer-provided health care, vacation or retirement packages” while also doing labor that is often unpaid such as “marketing, messaging with clients, planning [photo]shoots or shows, preparing legal forms and dealing with constantly changing legal requirements and stringent websites’ terms of service” (Jones 2021: para. 16). Safaei (2021) also notes that OnlyFans creators are unique from other gig workers in that they must find their own subscribers or clients, protect against piracy of their content, and manage stigma associated with sex work.

CHAPTER III: METHODS AND PROCEDURES

The objective of this study has been to identify narratives used by undergraduate women in the U.S. to make sense of their labor as sex workers within capitalist relations. Because this research is focused on women's narratives concerning their experiences, interviews were deemed essential. With the interviews, I could focus on the language the women use to construct and make sense of their reality (DeVault 1999: 60). To access these narratives, I implemented online social research methods, collected fieldnote data, and conducted semi-structured interviews of industry participants. Five participant interviews were conducted of women who had profited or were currently profiting from self-produced content on OnlyFans. Four of my participants ran an OnlyFans account while enrolled in undergraduate courses, while one participant (Sadie) started her account shortly after graduating from college during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. From these interviews, I conducted interpretive narrative analysis about their time and experiences as OnlyFans creators. Virtual fieldnotes were taken to supplement the in-person interviews, focusing on social media used by OnlyFans creators to promote their accounts, discuss their experiences, and connect with other creators. From these fieldnotes, I conducted a qualitative content analysis looking for communication trends of OnlyFans creators in online spaces.

Sample

The sample for this study consists of five women who are currently or have experience with producing and profiting from posting sexually explicit content on the OnlyFans platform. Participants were recruited using convenience sampling methods, such as snowball sampling and through participant recruitment flyers posted to social media. It proved difficult to recruit participants for this project, which speaks to the challenges of studying a stigmatized group as an

outsider. There has been distrust from the sex worker community towards researchers, as sex workers have often been the subjects of research that is harmful, stigmatizing, and unpaid (Hall 2022). Given this information, my thesis committee members thought it wise to acknowledge on my recruitment materials that I nor anyone on the committee had any personal experience with sex work. This allowed potential research participants to decide upfront whether they would be comfortable engaging in conversation with a student researcher who did not identify as a sex worker. Once funding was secured for this project, participants were rewarded \$25 for their time and expertise, paid through their choice of Cashapp, Paypal, Venmo, or other payment services. The funding was made possible through the Recruitment, Enrollment, and Retention Incentive Program (RERIP) funds, which were distributed to faculty in my department. A small portion of these funds were diverted to me by my thesis advisor, and the additional pay was approved through the academic employment services office.

Given the time restraints and the sensitive nature of the topic, I utilized convenience sampling in which participants were chosen based on their availability, specialized knowledge, and willingness to participate (Hesse-Biber 2017: 55). Snowball sampling was used in which participants were accessed through referrals to other women in the OnlyFans network (Hesse-Biber 2017: 57). Recruitment flyers were posted in-person around my university, as well as virtually posted on my personal social media accounts (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and Reddit). Reaching participants through mutual friends proved to be the most effective, as our mutual connection established a sense of trust and led to good rapport.

The following chart provides brief descriptions of my five participants, including demographic information and information regarding their time as an OnlyFans creator. While my

study was open to cis and trans women, only cis women volunteered to participate. Participants have all been given pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants (n = 5)

Name	Amy (she/her)	Brooke (she/her)	Chloe (she/her)	Janelle (they/she)	Sadie (she/her)
Age	22	24	23	27	26
Race	White	White	Black	Hispanic	White
Sexuality	Straight	Bisexual	Straight	Pansexual	Bisexual
Social class	Working	Middle	Working	Working	Working
Ed. Level	Associate degree	Bachelor of Science	Highschool diploma	Highschool diploma	Bachelor of Science
Currently in college?	Yes	No (graduated)	Yes	Yes	Grad student
Post on OnlyFans (OF) currently?	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
Other Employment while OF creator	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Previous sex work experience	Yes	No	No	No	Yes
Time spent as OF creator	1.5 yrs	3 yrs	2 yrs	3 yrs	Approx. 1.5 yrs

Data Collection

To collect data, I video and audio-recorded the semi-structured interviews of the five participants. The interviews were conducted over video calls via Zoom, given the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and geographic location of the participants. I allowed my participants to keep their cameras off for extra security if they desired. Upon ending the interviews, I deleted the video footage and used the separate, recorded audio file to “clean-up” the transcript that Zoom generated. Interviews were semi-structured, in which a list of preset questions was utilized regarding the topic of online sex work and the participants’ experiences as content creators on OnlyFans; however, if the respondent stated something I wanted to know more about, I detoured from my structured questions. In this way, the conversation flowed naturally, while also allowing participants the “latitude and freedom to talk about what is important to them” (Hesse-Biber 2017: 112). This freedom was significant, as the participants brought to the interview information and knowledge that I, as the researcher, had not considered while constructing the list of questions. The pre-set questions, as found in the Appendix, asked about their initial motivations for producing sexually explicit content on OnlyFans, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their experiences as a sex worker, the labor required of them as a content creator, their reactions to OnlyFans announcing and then reversing a ban on explicit content, and opinions on how to ensure sex work platforms are properly supporting their creators.

In addition to the semi-structured interviews, I collected data through virtual fieldnotes of online interactions concerning women profiting from self-produced explicit content on online sex work platforms. Primarily, I made note of interactions on the social media platforms Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and Reddit as many women advertise their OnlyFans accounts through their personal or anonymous social media accounts. While writing an ethnography on

prostitution in Britain, Sanders (2005) realized that sex workers were turning to the internet as a tool to advertise their services. The internet serves as an occupational tool for women who are sex workers to promote their business in a “cost-effective, efficient, and safe” way (Sanders 2005: 68). Similarly, online sex workers share posts on social media advertising their OnlyFans accounts, promoting their services with suggestive photos to entice potential clients.

Additionally, ample discourse takes place on Twitter and TikTok concerning sex work in which women in the industry discuss their experiences. Sanders (2005: 68) notes that on websites “factual information is given freely while at the same time trivial banter on bulletin boards forms the social cement that unites members and highlights their commonality, despite an absence of geographical proximity.” I have found social media posts and conversations in ‘threads’ in these posts as a source of information and insight into the industry, revealing knowledge about the occupation to which I do not have access otherwise.

Data Analysis

In the following chapter, I will provide an analysis of the data obtained from the participant interviews and draw upon my virtual fieldnotes to enhance the interview data. To start the data analysis process, I carefully edited and read the transcripts of the interviews that Zoom had generated. After familiarizing myself with the data, I then began the process of coding the interviews by “assigning meaning to a chunk of text” (Hesse-Biber 2017: 315). I started with open-coding, reading the transcripts line-by-line and identified ideas, themes, and taking note of anything I deemed surprising or interesting (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995). After gaining a general sense of ideas set forward by my participants, I switched to focus-coding by narrowing down themes and categories that I discovered through the open-coding process and then identified themes or categories that appeared to be related. Upon finishing the coding process, I

moved onto writing memos in which Hesse-Biber (2017: 311) described as the “beginnings of analysis and interpretation.” Keeping this in mind, I took note of anything from the interviews that I found to be interesting, significant, or problematic, sensitized to the prior literature I have read. Throughout the memos, I provided summaries of the collected data, and thick descriptions, and begin to link ideas together, as I tentatively moved into analysis by connecting moments of the interview to larger ideas of the study (Hesse-Biber 2017).

Researcher Reflexivity and Ethics

It has been crucial for me to keep in mind that I have a different background and belief system than my research participants, which can have an impact on the research process (Hesse-Biber 2017). Of the most importance, I hold an outsider status as I am not an OnlyFans creator myself nor have I had any personal experience with online or in-person sex work. I am also white, abled, cisgender, and identify as straight, all of which afford me certain privileges and impacts my worldview. I believe my status as a *student* researcher was a point of connection with my participants who are current or recent college students themselves. My participants were aware to varying degrees what a social research project broadly entails. I believe this knowledge provided a sense of security in their decision to participate in the study. Throughout this thesis, I have been careful to be aware of my own biases and assumptions about sex work and OnlyFans as a platform. I approached this project from a socialist-feminist perspective, concerned mainly about the exploitation of gendered labor in the digital gig economy and how popular discourse has failed to provide an accurate picture of the experiences of OnlyFans creators.

Prior to contacting any potential interview participants, this project underwent revisions and received an exempt status from the Institutional Review Board. When I contacted potential participants, I provided a brief description of the project and attached a consent form to read and

sign. The consent form detailed the project and the participant's role in it, any potential risks, how their participation contributed to the goal of the project, how collected data would be used, and my contact information (Hesse-Biber 2017). I assured potential participants that their participation was completely voluntary, and they could opt-out of the study "before, during, or after their initial participation" (Hesse-Biber 2017: 73). As maintaining my participants' confidentiality was extremely important, I informed participants that their names would not appear on any data collected and a pseudonym would be used when referring to them in the write-up of the results of the study. Before starting the recording of the Zoom interview, I gave my participants the option to have their cameras on or off, explaining that the video file would be deleted as soon as the transcript was generated. Audio files and transcripts were saved, and password protected onto my personal computer.

Concerning the virtual field notes, I observed interactions on social media platforms where my presence and intentions were unknown (Sanders 2005). The ethics of online research can be complicated, as the aspect of 'privacy' is convoluted on platforms that are publicly accessible to anyone (Sanders 2005). To mitigate any issues of confidentiality, I removed any identifying information from the posts I share in my research such as Twitter handles, hyperlinks to OnlyFans accounts, subreddit names, mention of names or sex worker personas, locations, or contact information.

Difficulties with Participant Recruitment

As previously stated, it proved difficult to recruit participants for this project. Initially, I posted participant recruitment flyers around my university's campus, distributed the flyer to a sexuality class at my university, and posted it on my personal social media accounts. My social media following is not large by any means, so I took my accounts off the 'private' setting and

employed the use of hashtags to get my flyer noticed by a wider audience. Since my recruitment flyer made direct reference to OnlyFans and sex work, I employed hashtags used by OnlyFans creators to avoid getting their posts deleted or accounts deleted such as #onlyfanz, #onlyfriends, and #of. I received little to no reaction from my Facebook, Twitter, or Redditt posts. However, I received direct messages and comments on pictures of myself on my Instagram profile from OnlyFans “promotion” accounts. The direct messages included pitches to promote my *own* OnlyFans profile on their accounts for an undisclosed price. Clearly, bots are utilized to send messages to any profiles that use hashtags associated with OnlyFans. Upon clicking on the profile of these promotional accounts, I noticed that they often had upwards of a million followers and thousands of posts advertising different women’s OnlyFans accounts along with various other social media platforms. Each post featured a woman’s picture, typically a selfie, with the comments instructing the viewer to follow the tagged Instagram profile which would provide their OnlyFans username. While this method did not result in any participants, it did expose me to the fact that there is a whole market that happens outside of the OnlyFans platform in which women pay the people behind these “promotion” profiles to advertise their accounts.

Furthermore, I came across many statements from sex workers on online forums begging for researchers to stop contacting them without offering proper compensation. Thus, I felt uncomfortable reaching out to strangers without the ability to pay them for their time. Before securing funding for this project, I primarily asked potential participants I organically encountered about their desire to participate in this study. I conducted two interviews through this method, although others had initially said “yes” and then later backed out upon receiving the consent form or before the Zoom interview commenced. My committee and I thus deemed it necessary to obtain funding for this study, which allowed me to backpay my initial two

participants and also to future participants. I updated my recruitment flyer, adding a line that participants will be compensated \$25 for their time and knowledge. I re-posted my flyer across my social media platforms and noticed that the engagement significantly increased. My email was soon flooded with inquiries about the study when I had received little to no interest before. I started emailing respondents back, thanking them for their interest, attaching the consent form, and asked about potential dates to commence with the interview. I conducted an interview with a participant that raised no red flags, however, when I went to conduct a separate interview the following day, the same individual from the day before appeared on the Zoom call. We lost connection due to unstable Wi-Fi before any questions could be asked and I cancelled the interview. I went back through my email inquiries and noticed that many of the emails came from Gmail accounts with similar usernames. I suspect a bot was used to generate several email accounts tied to an individual or a few users to access the \$25 compensation for the completed interview. This made me wary of continuing the recruitment process through social media, in which I then turned to friends who shared my flyer with personal connections.

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Motivations for Starting an OnlyFans Business:

To access my participants' narratives about their experiences as OnlyFans creators, I started at the beginning of their journey into content creation by inquiring about their initial motivations for joining the OnlyFans platform. Similar to what has been found in prior literature on women's entrance into the sex industry (Cobbina and Oselin 2011; Sagar et al. 2016) my participants relayed that they created an OnlyFans account out of economic necessity. It became evident that the COVID-19 pandemic and the costs associated with obtaining a college education compounded the financial struggles that motivated my participants to create an OnlyFans account.

COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent economic downturn spurred the "sudden disappearance of entry-level jobs in hospitality, retail and associated functions," impacting the employment opportunities of young adults (Cardoso, Chronaki, and Scarelli 2022: 169). Likewise, some of my participants experienced job loss leading them to create sexually explicit content on OnlyFans. While completing her undergraduate degree, Brooke worked as a waitress and booked regular gigs as a boudoir and nude model. During the onset of the pandemic, the restaurant she worked at shut down for two months and the in-person modeling gigs were canceled. Finding herself suddenly unemployed, Brooke created an OnlyFans account and started uploading old modeling photos onto her profile:

It was obviously the pandemic, and no one had any idea what was going on. I felt like I was sitting on all this [modeling] content that I could be reproducing on another platform. I just felt like I could be capitalizing on a business [OnlyFans] that wasn't going out of business in the middle of the pandemic.

Brooke saw an opportunity to earn money off her previous modeling photos, aligning with another study that found creators “were drawn to OnlyFans because they had existing content, audiences, or skills that they could leverage to quickly develop a profitable OnlyFans page” (Hamilton et al. 2022: 8). Regarding the understanding of sex work and allied fields, it is important to view this field through the lens of those who work in multiple capacities across various industries. Contrary to popular stereotypes, sex work requires considerable talent and the ability to adapt to new work situations.

Another participant, Sadie, turned to OnlyFans when she lost her job due to the pandemic and was unable to collect unemployment benefits:

I mean due to the lack of support from the [U.S.] government, while watching my best friends in Australia receive weekly support... I still had finances [bills] to pay even though I didn't have a job and couldn't collect unemployment. There was a ton stacked against me that pretty much pushed me into OnlyFans.

As Sadie points out, many people in the U.S. were left without proper support during the pandemic requiring many to search for alternative income. Previous research has shown that both sex work and the gig economy are industries people enter when “they lack other financial options” (Safae 2021: 52). Perhaps it is no surprise then that OnlyFans became so popular amidst the economic downturn of the pandemic, as the platform merges online sex work with the digital gig economy.

While Brooke and Sadie were temporarily unemployed during the pandemic, other participants had various experiences. Amy explained that although she was employed during the initial months of the pandemic, she received minimal hours and was unable to support herself:

I moved to [university] after having completed community college where I was living at home. During the pandemic, the job I moved here for was getting minimal hours and I was not able to support myself because I didn't have any extra [student]

loan money or anything. Since I was living alone and could control my finances a little better, I looked into starting an OnlyFans as opposed to other methods.

Amy's experience points to the complicated position college students found themselves in during the pandemic. Amidst negative financial impacts, students "still had to meet their living costs and fees associated with their studies" (Gewalt, et al. 2022: para. 3). While Amy's school fees were covered by loans and she had a job, it was not enough to cover the cost of living. Thus, she turned to content creation on OnlyFans after hearing about it on social media and thought it was an appealing idea to have a job that you can "control yourself, be your own boss, and control your own prices." Amy noted that she had previously sold explicit content through Twitter messages in which customers paid via services like Venmo, but OnlyFans streamlined the process and would pay directly to her bank account. Living alone for the first time gave her the financial freedom to feel comfortable in setting up OnlyFans direct deposit, without being worried her parents would notice her bank statements.

Costs of College

There is limited research about the motivations of college students who enter the sex industry, and the studies that do exist are largely based in Europe (Stewart 2021). However, financial motivations are understood to be the primary reason college students engage in sex work. Sagar et al.'s (2016: 713-14) research of U.K. college students revealed that "the money from sex work enables them to avoid debt, cover basic living expenses and fund their lifestyle." I thought it was important to directly ask my U.S.-based participants if the financial cost of their college education was a factor in deciding to create an OnlyFans account. Participants shared varied responses about the immediate costs of textbooks and future student loan repayment as considerations in their decision to make an OnlyFans account:

Brooke: I knew I would need a cushion for student loans, but it wasn't immediately a factor in my deciding to do OnlyFans. It really was just an afterthought, like "Oh gosh, I am gonna have to pay uber-dollars in student loans soon," so this is a good thing to have in my back pocket.

Janelle: Around that time [of starting OnlyFans] I was back in school, and books were kind of expensive and the grants and scholarships I had didn't cover all of it, so I needed that extra little bit of income to help with my schooling.

Chloe: [E]ducation isn't cheap! My student loans are crazy high, so everything factoring in I felt like it was too much to get my education without having to take a break [from school] and do it later.

While Brooke explained that student loans were more of an afterthought when it came to deciding to create an OnlyFans account, Janelle and Chloe shared that the costs of education directly influenced their decision. For Chloe, the income she generated from OnlyFans allowed her to stay enrolled at her university without having to take a break. They both described how much of their OnlyFans income went to education, Janelle shared "about 90% of it" and Chloe explained that "60% of it goes to my education, around 30% goes into my lifestyle and my bills, and then around 10% I send back home."

My two other participants, Amy and Sadie, explained that the costs of living while balancing the duties expected of college students influenced their decision to create an OnlyFans account:

Sadie: Even though I had full support from my mom for tuition and everything, rent was devastating. I was a full-time athlete on top of both being a full-time student, and I had a part-time job. Then the pandemic hits you in the face, so there was no money left!

Amy: It wasn't so much my college education because I already had the understanding that everything regarding school was going to be paid through loans.

But it was definitely the fact that I wasn't able to work as often as I did, even before the pandemic I wouldn't be able to work as often as I did in community college or in high school, just because of the demand [of university]. But it's the cost of living in general as a student, not necessarily the education itself.

The experiences of my participants indicate that college students, particularly women students, are turning to sexually explicit content creation on OnlyFans to fund their education, school-related, and living expenses. The popular website used to facilitate relationships between so-called "sugar babies and sugar daddies," Seeking Arrangements or now simply called "Seeking," has a well-recorded college student population with an estimated over three million students registered on the platform from the U.S. alone (Stewart 2021). There are no records of the amount of college students on OnlyFans, but it appears to be following in the footsteps of Seeking as far as popularity amongst students. Perhaps even more so, as Seeking implies there will be some form of a transactional relationship off the platform while on OnlyFans it is not assumed the creator will meet subscribers in real life, making it the safer option. Regardless, the trend of college students financing their education through sex work is in part a reaction to the neoliberal shift of education from a "public good to what is now considered a private investment/decision" in which costs have risen astronomically (Stewart 2022: 86). It is noted that the "the picture of the corporatized higher education system, correlated with rising student debt, is completed by the increased participation of students in the sex industry over the same period" (Roberts 2018: 33 as cited in Stewart 2022: 87). Thus, the correlation between rising student debt and an increase in student participation in the sex industry adds another ripple to the broader discussion of "the corporatization of higher ed."

Additionally, previous research has found that college students get involved in sex work because of the money-to-time ratio and flexibility that the work offers, "particularly since it was

so compatible with the demands of attending college” (Haeger and Deil-Amen 2010: 6).

Similarly, Amy mentioned that OnlyFans interested her because she knew the time demands of university would prevent her from working as often as she had throughout high school and community college. Brooke also noted that OnlyFans was a “low maintenance” form of income, compared to the work she had previously done as a waitress and bartender. Chloe explained a similar sentiment when I asked what initially motivated her to start an OnlyFans account:

That was the first thing, my current financial situation. I felt like I needed to support my parents at that time. Also, beyond my initial motivation of financial struggles, my friend was doing very well [on OnlyFans] and I couldn't figure out how she was making it because it's not like regular jobs were doing that for her. So that was great motivation, even though I was not comfortable doing it.

Even though Chloe was initially uncomfortable with producing sexually explicit content, she noticed her friend's OnlyFans account was more financially rewarding than that of traditional employment. Many students, like Chloe, are aware that the amount of money one can earn from sex work is “something they would not be able to achieve through other types of work or labor forms” (Stewart 2022: 87). Many of my participants agreed that OnlyFans was a legitimate money maker, with most stating that they had made more money than they had expected to on the platform. However, it was noted that this is not always the case. Janelle explained “I was only using OnlyFans to be able to purchase textbooks. So, it has worked for my intended purpose. There are some people who go on there thinking that they're going to make a lot of money, but they don't.” Janelle used OnlyFans mostly as a supplemental income.

The Unpaid Labor of OnlyFans Creators:

Despite the promised autonomy of the entrepreneurial rhetoric that draws so many people into the digital gig economy, it has been found that the platform economy creates challenges to

employment and working conditions such as “irregular pay, health-and-safety concerns and unpredictable working time” that have only been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Pulignano and Piasna 2021: para. 1). Furthermore, unpaid labor is a “systemic feature of platform work, inherent in its model of work organization” (Pulignano and Piasna 2021: para 2). Unpaid labor refers to the “extraction of economic (‘surplus’) value from the workforce without compensation and usually consists of unremunerated, yet ‘productive’ activities performed by the worker and/or freelancer beside their paid tasks” (Pulignano and Piasna 2021: para. 3). Pulignano and Piasna (2021) explain that there are two common forms of unpaid labor within the platform economy, *time-based* and *non-time-based* unpaid labor. Pulignano (2021: 11) focuses her research on food delivery platform workers, in which time-based unpaid labor consists of “travel time [...], search time [...], wait time to access orders [...], as well as waiting time for problem-solution due to platforms inefficient/automated support system.” Non-time-based unpaid labor for food delivery workers include aspects that a worker’s performance is dependent upon, although the platform “may not consider essential to productivity,” such as “bike maintenance and paying for work gear and equipment” in bicycle food-delivery jobs (Pulignano 2021: 11). Beyond food delivery platform workers, non-time-based unpaid labor includes “work intensification and pay-to-labour, such as platform fees and purchasing equipment” (Pulignano and Piasna 2021: para. 6). Based on the experiences that my participants shared with me, I argue that content preparation and account promotion are major sources of non-time-based and time-based unpaid labor for OnlyFans creators.

Content Preparation

The time and energy spent during the content preparation stage is rarely accounted for when setting subscription prices on OnlyFans. Instead, my participants explained that they

simply price-matched similar creators on the OnlyFans platform and assessed realistically how much they could charge based on the size of their following. Brooke explained:

Right off the bat I was looking at other creators to see what they charged and thought about what I was worth because I don't have a million followers [...]. I am just a college girl and a bartender.

Despite being unaccounted for in subscription fees, the preparation one performs before creating content and uploading it to the OnlyFans platform is relatively laborious. For example, tasks often include fixing one's hair, applying makeup, outfit changes, and setting-up to film. The set-up required to film involves its own set of tasks such as creating an aesthetic shooting location, adjusting lighting, and setting up a tripod. Once the content is shot, it is then edited before it can be posted.

My participants explained that preparation to film was typically a several hour-long affair, although this fluctuated depending on the intricacy of the content being filmed. Sadie described the intricacies involved in the process of content preparation:

It is a full-time job! The amount of content that you have to create that has to look of a certain quality, the upkeep you have to do for your body, editing your photos, editing your videos, [...] the outfits and the makeup costs—you run through makeup so fast. If you have multiple partners or trying to collab with people, you have to pay for and take an STI test. It requires so much of your attention and so much of your effort.

According to Pulignano's (2021) definition, the performance of tasks such as putting on makeup, setting up an aesthetic filming location, and editing content can be considered time-based unpaid labor as the time spent on these tasks is uncompensated. However, as Sadie noted, content preparation often goes beyond hair, makeup, and setup. It includes a certain amount of technical skill to edit content, money spent on outfits and makeup, STI tests if one is doing partner work,

and maintaining a certain physique. These are tasks that I consider non-time-based unpaid labor, as they require an intensification of work and a monetary investment.

While the time and effort creators exert into making content is often unaccounted for while setting subscription prices, pay-per-view custom content sent over private messages is an exception. Sadie explained:

If they're asking me for a thirty second video, I'm going to charge them for how long it takes me to get ready for that thirty second video, especially if it's personal and not to be shared with anyone else. If it's for multiple people, I charge way less because then it ultimately ends up paying off for all my time and effort.

Custom content is priced higher than the subscription fee to access one's profile as it requires the creator to exert additional time and, in many cases, the content is more sexually explicit than what a creator would typically post in their feed.

Account Promotion

In addition to content preparation, a major source of unpaid labor for OnlyFans creators is account promotion. Account promotion is vital for OnlyFans creators as the platform has no built-in recommendation page in which subscribers could discover new creators. Instead, creators must provide would-be subscribers with a specific link directing them to their account. My participants understood this feature, or lack thereof, to be an effort by OnlyFans to protect creator's privacy but also cited this as a drawback of the platform.

Brooke: Maybe in a perfect world there would be a little more exploration to find similar creators, it could spread the wealth a little bit farther. Like, "oh you're a fan of Bella Thorne, here's a smaller creator that's a lot like her but maybe needs the money." So, something like that could be beneficial.

Since promoting one's OnlyFans account is necessary, creators do so by creating promotional posts on social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, Reddit, and Discord. Due to the strict

censorship on these platforms, creators must strategically post content that will not get their profiles flagged when promoting their OnlyFans account (Safae 2021). This becomes a significant source of time-based unpaid labor; my participants stressed the time and effort one would have to put into OnlyFans account promotion to be considered a successful account:

Janelle: It takes a lot of work. I use [OnlyFans] as more of a part-time thing to help me with getting a little extra money here and there for specific things. I don't spend as much time as other people promoting it, but it does take a lot of promoting, a lot of hours that you have to put in to be one of those bigger pages.

Brooke: I know the girls that post every single day and promoting themselves everywhere all the time were doing twice the numbers I was doing. So, I think putting your all into it is really the key to being successful on OnlyFans because I didn't have a large fanbase or something to profit off of right off the bat, I had to build it from scratch.

As the above comments demonstrate, creators vary in how often they promote their content depending upon the goals of their account. Sadie further explained, "it can be a part time job but if you want to be really successful, it has to eventually become a fulltime job."

When I asked my participants how often they promoted their account, responses ranged from several times a month to every day:

Sadie: I would talk to the different Discord chats, I would post stuff on Reddit, and that was everyday if not every-other day. I would post a couple of times to make sure that I was still active, because you can fall into the social media abyss so fast.

As Sadie notes, it is easy to become lost amongst the thousands of other posts being made on social media platforms per minute. This means that OnlyFans creators that want to stay competitive on the platform must continuously be promoting their accounts. Meanwhile, in the act of carefully advertising their own accounts, creators are also drawing an audience and subsequent revenue to the OnlyFans platform.

While collecting virtual fieldnotes, I came across various subreddits dedicated to OnlyFans account promotion. Some were for all types of creators while others were devoted to those with niche physical characteristics or specific types of content. Within these promotional subreddits, OnlyFans creators post a picture of themselves and tag it “NSFW” (not safe for work), which blurs the image until the post is expanded by the user. The posts’ titles frequently contain a flirty message followed by a short physical description of the creator and/or of the type of content they create. A link to the creator’s OnlyFans account is typically shared in the comment section of these posts. The majority of these subreddits appear to be moderated by OnlyFans creators themselves. Additionally, there are subreddits dedicated to subscribers’ reviews of OnlyFans creators and potential subscribers seeking recommendations for creators that cater to their tastes. The posts seeking recommendations for OnlyFans creators describe the type of content or the physical attributes of the desired content creator and current subscribers will suggest OnlyFans creators in the comments of the post. These posts give OnlyFans’ creators the opportunity to promote their own accounts in the comments, often listing their physical characteristics, such as race and body type, along with the type of content they produce with a link to their OnlyFans account.

Beyond creators posting their own promotional OnlyFans content on social media, a market exists in which creators can outsource account promotion. One of the ways to outsource labor is to hire an “OnlyFans manager,” typically a man who runs the behind the scenes of several women’s accounts. This eases the amount of time-based unpaid labor OnlyFans creators must perform, but creators must decide whether the return is worth monetarily investing in a manager. OnlyFans managers take on a myriad of tasks such as promoting content and accounts across social media, posting content on the OnlyFans platform, acting as photographer, and

responding to private messages disguised as the owner of the account. Brooke is the only one of my participants who told me she employed an OnlyFans manager, explaining that a guy friend approached her and said, “I know you don’t want to do the work, so I’ll do it if you want me to.” Brooke’s manager was paid a fraction of her OnlyFans earnings, including a base fee and a percentage of all the earnings she made over an agreed upon amount. It appears that for Brooke, having a manager was ideal as it allowed her to keep her OnlyFans as low maintenance as possible. In 2022, the *New York Times* in the words of an OnlyFans agency manager dubbed this promotional role as “The ‘E-Pimps’ of OnlyFans.”

Emotional Labor and the Girlfriend Experience:

Emotional labor refers to the management of one’s feeling “in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others” (Hochschild [1983] 2012: 7). In other words, workers are expected to “produce, manage, and indeed market authentic emotions as an essential part of their jobs” (Laurin 2019: 64). Emotional labor is required on digital sex work platforms like OnlyFans, further taxing “adult performers who must always appear ‘on’ and accessible in order to maximize their earning potential in a rapidly changing adult industry” (Laurin 2019: 64-5). In late-stage capitalism, intimacy has been commodified in which the emotional involvement and affection that was previously regulated to the private sphere has “increasingly [been] applied to the public sphere of businesses and institutions, including the State” (Carbonero and Garrido 2018: 386). Online sex workers produce a commodified intimacy, otherwise referred to as the “girlfriend experience” in which content production and subscriber interaction is presented as an “authentic” experience. This often requires the sex worker to perform a facet of emotional labor referred to as “deep-acting” in

which one manages their own inner emotions to produce the proper state of mind in others (Carbonero and Garrido 2018; Hochschild [1983] 2012).

When it comes to OnlyFans creators, deep-acting involves producing feelings within themselves that their work is authentically sexually pleasurable. My participant, Sadie, demonstrates one way she produces authenticity through her content production:

It's exhausting to always have to be on, which is why it's very important to set aside like two days a week or so where you actually work and create content because you're not horny and sweaty and like well ... an attention-whore all of the time. It's just those brief moments where you have to get it out of the way in one chunk because it's just exhausting, and burnout definitely happens.

Like Sadie, all my participants explained that they filmed content once or twice a month to then post on their profiles throughout the month. This serves a practical purpose, taking one day out of the month to create content is much more manageable than creating content every day.

Furthermore, creating content when one desires sexual activity maintains authenticity for both the creator and the subscriber of the content. Creators can spread out the content taken once a month and post it several times a week, giving the appearance to subscribers that they are always "on." This adds to the subscribers' appeal of amateur sites like OnlyFans, as it enhances the notion that creators are creating sexually explicit content "for the love of it" (Laurin 2019: 67).

When the performance of sexuality stops feeling authentic, or when the deep-acting of emotional labor fails, troubles with one's identity may arise. When I asked my participant, Amy, whether she found the experience of creating content to be sexually positive she stated:

There's a lot to it, and I'm still coming to terms with it. I would say it's relatively neutral because of situations I was in outside of sex work coupled with the inherent objectification of it. It was not a great feeling, even though I was trying to brand it to myself like that [it was great].

Even though Amy found producing sexual content to be objectifying, she attempted to make herself feel sexually empowered in order to produce content that appeared to be authentic as necessary for success on the OnlyFans platform.

Previous studies have found that “the performative acts of sex work can lead to difficulties maintaining an ‘authentic’ sense of self” (Turcotte and Lanctot 2021: 296). Amy later shared a similar sentiment:

Having to perform your sexuality in a way that you want to naturally but for the sake of content can get really confusing and can blur the lines between what you actually like, how you actually behave, and what you actually want versus what you think everyone else wants from you.

Amy’s comment depicts a consequence of emotional labor referred to as “emotional dissonance.” This occurs when emotions are performed that are “neither coherent nor congruent with privately held feelings” leading to a perceived loss of identity (Turcotte and Lanctot 2021: 296). As sexual content creators on OnlyFans, the women I interviewed found it difficult to maintain a clear separation between personal and private life complicated by their subscribers seeking the “girlfriend experience,” which can create dissonance regarding emotional boundaries for creators.

Subscriber Interactions and Burnout

OnlyFans creators perform emotional labor while interacting with subscribers, in which they must produce feelings of authenticity, intimacy, and desirability. A study on escorts found that the girlfriend experience was sustained by establishing a rapport with clients through texting or online messaging (Carbonero and Garrido 2018). Similarly, OnlyFans creators connect with their fans or subscribers on the OnlyFans platform and across social media. Atkinson (2022: 96) found that on platforms like Instagram, creators post pictures of themselves to promote their

OnlyFans while also engaging with fans by liking or responding to their comments, allowing “clients to feel instantly connected to the creator.” These interactions with subscribers can be an overwhelmingly positive experience, as Sadie shared:

The attention was great because it was just “how gorgeous you are,” “how beautiful you are,” what they would do for you like “my god! I would marry you!”. Even though I know these are all just words, it’s still lovely to hear the little Prince Charming messages that come through. And there’s the dirty messages that just make me laugh.

Sadie expressed her appreciation for the positive feedback she received regarding her appearance though understood the men’s messages were “just words” when it came to the *Pretty Woman* myth of being “saved” by Prince Charming.

However, subscriber interactions can quickly become uncomfortable and in some cases dangerous. Still, sex workers are often “expected to express affection, interest, and compassion while concealing negatively-valenced emotions of disgust, pity, or anger” while dealing with clients (Wolfe, Blithe, and Mohr 2018: 204). Often, this may involve a component of emotional labor known as “surface-acting” in which one does not deceive themselves of their true emotions, but continues to produce the desired emotion in others. Creators often have their boundaries pushed and are asked for content that makes them uncomfortable (Safaei 2021). In these cases, Sadie explained that she would charge more for content she did not desire to make:

If it was something I absolutely didn’t want to do out of sheer laziness or if it was something like “this isn’t something I’m into” or whatever, I would jack the price so far up that like no normal human being would pay for it. But then they would pay for it, and I was like “Okay, now I’ll do it.”

Economic motivation often dictates the sex worker’s “concealment not only of negatively-valenced emotions,” but also ensures the performance of the client’s desired emotion from her

(Wolfe, Blithe, and Mohr 2018: 204). As Sadie described, she did not always want to perform the tasks requested of her, but was economically motivated to conceal her disinterest and instead create the desired content.

Unfortunately, creators experience harassment from subscribers across social media platforms that becomes not only emotionally draining but, in some cases, dangerous. Brooke and Sadie both described harassment they received across different platforms concerning their OnlyFans account:

Brooke: I always had someone if I wasn't logged in for a couple days, they [subscribers] would be in my [direct messages] on Instagram asking "Where are you? Where is this? Where is that?" Which then led to immediate guilt like all the time because I was like "Oh my gosh! I said I would post it and I haven't posted it. I didn't get this edited today, oh my gosh, they're going to be so mad!" It was kind of always on my mind, especially by the end. I was like "I am so tired of thinking about these strangers and what they care about."

Sadie: Creating content is a sexually positive experience but sharing it... people become nasty in regards that they believe they're entitled to this now. They believe they're entitled to you, no one showed up to my house or anything but it's just the level of demands. If you weren't posting content at the right time, it was my first understanding of what it would be like to be a pop star where people have such high expectations of them as if they're not still human beings with their own lives. I still get messages from people like "why aren't you posting on OnlyFans?" and it's been so long.

Clearly, some subscribers have a sense of entitlement over OnlyFans creators' time and attention. This makes it difficult for creators to authentically enjoy their experience with producing content, leading to eventual burnout.

Burnout refers to a “syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal competence as a consequence of long-lasting work–stress and a latent process of psychological erosion” (Vanwesenbeeck 2005: 628). OnlyFans creators have reported needing to take a break from their accounts as it is “exhausting preparing and creating content, and constantly engaging with fans” (Atkinson 2022: 70). A few of my participants discussed feeling exhausted due to performing the desires of subscribers and needing to take a break from content creation:

Amy: That’s why I took the break that I did [...], it is exhausting to be something you’re not. It’s especially exhausting to literally perform your sexuality and your femininity and if it’s not being received as well or not as well as you would hope, especially when money is on the line. That’s so incredibly exhausting and harmful.

Chloe: I took a three-month break from OnlyFans, trying to reconnect with myself and take a break away from the environment where you are listening every time to other people’s demands and all that.

Brooke: It kind of tripped me up just always having to appeal to someone in order to monetarily benefit. It was definitely hard to be “nitpicked” by a photographer and then I started doing it myself. It was actually a lot of the reason I quit because I found myself talking to these people that I was like “what’s the point?”

Brooke details that she began to “nitpick” aspects of her body in the photos and videos she produced for OnlyFans. This demonstrates the way that OnlyFans creators must indulge in self-surveillance, ensuring that their feminine bodies please and excite their male subscribers (Bartky 1988).

Amy’s self-image was also impacted during her time as an OnlyFans creator, as she practiced discipline on and against her own body:

It changed the way I viewed myself and how I thought about myself during sex, like positioning myself how I looked during it, so it lost its authenticity, and it

definitely wasn't as enjoyable with partners. And also, with myself, I was very aware of how I looked at all times.

Amy's experiences as an OnlyFans creator made her offline sexual experiences feel inauthentic. She became very aware of her self-image and focused on positioning her body to be aesthetically desirable during intimacy. Again, this indicates the harm that "emotional dissonance" may cause, in which one loses their sense of identity.

Managing Stigma:

In-person and online sex workers constitute a stigmatized group, in which stigma refers to a "social attribute or mark that separates individuals from others based on socially given judgment" (Goffman 1963 as cited in Benoit et al. 2017: 458). Stigmatization has deeply negative impacts such as social isolation, decreased mental health, barriers to resources, and even violence. Importantly, sex workers "engage in an assortment of passive and active strategies to challenge stigmatizers and stigmatization processes" (Benoit et al. 2017: 463). One stigma management technique is the act of disclosing or concealing one's sex worker status, which involves assessing when it is safe or necessary to share that one is a sex worker. In an undergraduate honor's thesis, Michael Gomes (2022: 3) used "LGBTQ+ coming out literature" to investigate the disclosure process of online sex workers. My findings largely corroborate Gomes's research, while expanding on the disclosure process of OnlyFans creators by including employers and intimate partners in addition to family and friends. I also examine the ways in which OnlyFans creators manage and reframe internalized stigma.

Disclosing to Employers

Disclosure of sex worker status to mainstream employers is inherently risky, as sex workers routinely face employment discrimination. A recent example that became highly

publicized was of Lauren Kwei, a paramedic who was let go from her position after her OnlyFans account was outed at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic (Dickson 2020a). Therefore, in-person and online sex workers often choose to actively conceal their sex worker status to traditional employers as a way to manage stigmatization.

A few of my participants spoke about concealing their sex worker status to current or future traditional employers, by using an alias for OnlyFans and social media used for promoting content. Sadie explained that she went as far as to quit posting on OnlyFans because she was worried it would impact her employment at a school. Sadie revealed, “The last time I posted on OnlyFans was about a month into my previous job, which is where I was an administrator assistant at a preschool, and I just stopped because it made me nervous.” Amy commented that while she would prefer that her OnlyFans activity was not discovered, she was not overly concerned about it because upon graduating college she wanted to pursue a career in “sex psychology and human sexuality,” and felt the field may be open to hiring former sex workers.

Brooke shared that she was comfortable disclosing her status as an OnlyFans creator to co-workers at her bar-tending job, but concealed her status at a corporate job:

I did have a corporate job for a while, but they never knew I had an OnlyFans, of course. But I am comfortable promoting myself at work as a bartender and server.

I didn't care about my job seeing or knowing. I even had my coworkers on there.

Brooke's anecdote demonstrates how sex workers must make careful decisions about the audience in which one chooses to disclose or conceal their status. Brooke decided it was safe and even beneficial to disclose her status as an OnlyFans creator at her restaurant job, as she could promote it to co-workers and patrons who would be interested in subscribing to her account. However, it was deemed unsafe to disclose at a corporate job as supervisors and coworkers may

be more likely to find OnlyFans content creation as “unprofessional” and against company culture which could lead to her dismissal.

Disclosing to Family and Friends

When disclosing their status to family members, OnlyFans creators must consider their family’s personal, moral, and political beliefs concerning sex work. Most of my participants stated that they chose not to disclose their OnlyFans status to their parents or extended family, although siblings were a common exception. They provided varied reasons for concealing their work on OnlyFans to parents, but primarily it was to avoid unnecessary conflict or harm. For example, Janelle explained that they have not informed their religious family as they would find the work to be immoral. OnlyFans creators who “come out” to religious or conservative family members are often met with hostility, a reaction Janelle was attempting to avoid (Gomes 2022).

Meanwhile, Sadie explained that she wished she could speak to her parents about her time as a OnlyFans creator, but feels she cannot because of their political opinions on sex work:

My parents had no idea and neither does my extended family, but that’s a whole different issue. My parents are super liberal but are anti-porn which I think is super weird and doesn’t make sense based on the rest of their beliefs. They’re weirdly on the fence about sex work, whether it should be legalized or not. I’m a firm believer that sex work should be legalized so we can regulate it [...]. The thing that sucks the most is I couldn’t tell my family like “hey, I’m making all this money and I’m pretty much running my own business.” I have a very open and honest relationship with my family and so not being able to talk to my parents about it really sucks.

Sadie’s story reveals the emotional pain of being unable to share an important part of one’s life in an otherwise trusting parental relationship. Furthermore, Sadie takes pride in having operated an OnlyFans account and finds it disappointing not having her parent share in her

accomplishments. If Sadie were to disclose to her parents that she was an OnlyFans creator, they would have to contend with their conflicting political beliefs about pornography and the work in which their daughter participated. Similarly, Gomes (2022: 27) notes that OnlyFans creators may not disclose to family members as “a mercy to them, sparing their kin from possible negative feelings about their work.” Concealing her status as an OnlyFans creator kept Sadie from having unwanted tension with her parents.

Those that choose to disclose their OnlyFans creator status to family members, tend to do so within safe-power dynamics (Gomes 2022). Safe-power dynamics in a familial structure include trustworthy siblings, supportive parents, or parents with no economic power over their child even if they disapprove of the work. My participants corroborate Gomes’s findings, in that they primarily disclosed to trusted siblings who proved to be open-minded and held no economic power over the well-being of my participants. Although Sadie felt she had to conceal her work as an OnlyFans creator from her parents, she disclosed to her brothers and sister who turned out to be “super supportive” and stressed that Sadie take safety measures. Meanwhile, Brooke’s parents have always been supportive, so she assessed that it was safe to disclose to them that she had an OnlyFans account. She shared that they reacted positively but expressed that they “don’t ever want to see it.” While Brooke’s parents were ultimately supportive of her OnlyFans account, she worried that they would stumble across her content, and it would shatter the image of her as their “innocent little girl.” This is a common fear amongst online sex workers, whether their family accepts sex work or not because “seeing family members as sexual beings is not accepted” (Gomes 2022: 21).

My participants all shared that they disclosed to their friends that they were OnlyFans creators, which resulted in varying positive and negative responses. Amy shared that her close

friends all knew about her OnlyFans account and were supportive, in some cases they even helped her take photos for her account. Similarly, Janelle noted that their friends were supportive and “not surprised” they have an OnlyFans business. Brooke explained that the friends she disclosed to were supportive, but when former friends had found out about her OnlyFans account they had “talked poorly” about her.

Unfortunately, Chloe and Sadie shared that they had not such positive experiences with friends.

Chloe: My life has definitely changed before OnlyFans and now. I’d say in all aspects, especially with friends who do not know what you do and then come to realize what it is you do, there is a lot of disrespect that goes around sometime.

Sadie: People I had considered friends... it was interesting to find out how badly they wanted to sleep with me, both men and women. I am not friends with them anymore. I know that some of them thought that they were doing a really good job with being supportive, but it ended up going into Creepyville. There’s one thing of supporting me and there’s another thing of always talking about the stuff that I post; it was a little too far.

Both stories demonstrate the continued stigmatization of sex workers, in which they are disrespected and have their boundaries crossed. Chloe’s friends held respect for her until her sex worker status was revealed, subsequently changing their perception of her. On the other hand, Sadie’s supposed friends thought her work as an OnlyFans creator gave them a free pass to sexually objectify her and made her feel uncomfortable.

Disclosing to Intimate Partners

OnlyFans creators must decide whether or not to disclose their sex worker status to potential intimate partners. The process of deciding to disclose one’s sex worker status is complicated by “sex work stigma and fear that partners will react negatively once the secret

information is revealed” (Jansson et al 2022: 1). My participants all spoke about “coming out” or disclosing their sex worker status to potential partners, relaying to me various responses from their partners. Sadie explained that she values communication, so disclosing was an important step for her before getting into a serious relationship. Her basic ground rule for dating was that her potential partner would have to be supportive and understanding of her past experiences as a digital sex worker:

I’m very open when I talk to people that I’m planning on getting into a relationship with. I’m like “hey, I’ve done this, this, and this. It’s a very key part of my life, it may or may not come back up.” It’s something people have to deal with because I still do, and probably will for the rest of my life, get demanding text messages. So, I’ve never been with anyone that wasn’t okay with it.

This aligns with research on in-person sex worker disclosure to intimate partners, in which the “main motivation for disclosing their sex work centered on the need or desire to be honest” (Jansson et al 2022: 7). Sadie indicated a desire for a partner who is accepting and understanding of her on-again-off-again OnlyFans profession, while maintaining honesty in her relationships.

Additionally, Sadie’s disclosure allows her to assess which partners would be easily jealous of the demanding text messages she continues to receive regarding her previous time as an OnlyFans creator. Disclosing can also allow one to use “their partners as safety measures” in the case of harassment (Jansson et al. 2022: 8). If a potential partner is not willing to be supportive of her previous work, Sadie knows that it would not be worth pursuing the relationship. Janelle shared a similar sentiment to Sadie, stating “if someone is not okay with it, I will find someone new.”

OnlyFans creators run the risk of sexual objectification when deciding to disclose to potential intimate partners. My participants explained that after disclosing their status as an

explicit content creator, potential partners may assume they are promiscuous and willing to do sexual acts they were uncomfortable with performing. Chloe shared with me that many potential partners were unwilling to pursue an intimate relationship after learning about her status as an OnlyFans creator:

Before I get into a sexual relationship, I explain to them what I'm doing so they feel more comfortable. Most of them are not comfortable, so it affects my relationships. Or people think of you in the wrong type of way, and you spend a lot of time trying to explain yourself.

Chloe noted potential partners thought of her in the “wrong type of way,” which she later explained to mean they believed that she has “no moral compass” and is “very promiscuous.”

Similarly, Amy described that after disclosing to potential intimate partners she received “gross” and “cringy” responses about her status as an OnlyFans creator. She shared that an ex-partner received sexual pleasure from knowing other people paid to see Amy's explicit content on OnlyFans, while he got to see her for ‘free.’

Amy: As far as sexual relationships, it's been interesting because I haven't told like every person I have had sex with that I had an OnlyFans. But for the people I was seriously interested in, I told them, and there have been some pretty gross and cringy responses and its definitely telling of the other person because my current boyfriend does not care and only said like “it sucked you needed the money.” But for a previous partner, it was obviously a sexual thing for him. I didn't pick up on it at the time, but he was like “it's so hot that people pay to see you and I get to see you for free,” which is a very weird reaction.

Amy was sexually objectified by her former partner, in which he saw her as a sexual object desirable to other men. Benoit et al. (2020) reported that sex workers may internalize the negative labels placed on them by intimate partners. The objectifying response from Amy's

former partner validated Amy's internalized stigma regarding the work she was doing as an OnlyFans creator.

Management of Internalized Stigma

Stigma can be internalized by sex workers, in which negative assumptions about sex workers "appear as justified and adopted as being true representations of the self" (Benoit et al. 2020: 83). Chloe explained that initially she did not see herself as someone who would ever make sexually explicit content, so when she started her OnlyFans account due to financial necessity she struggled with the change in self-image:

Chloe: It really gets to you at some point, it makes you demean yourself and makes you look at yourself in a different way. I struggled with that at first, I couldn't believe what I was doing because I never thought I would be doing [sex work] at any point in my life. So, I had to come to terms with the situation I'm in right now and what I'm doing.

Chloe had to make peace with her new status, which she was eventually able to do by separating the person she was on her OnlyFans account versus who she was in her everyday life. This is a common technique of stigma management, in which "alternative personas and/or strict separation between work identity and personal selves are constructed and enforced" (Benoit et al 2020: 83). Thus, the challenge of internalized stigma among sex workers may lead to "double lives" to manage concealable stigmatized identities.

Similarly, Amy described internal struggles with self-objectification and over-sexualization that her time on OnlyFans only exasperated:

I struggled [for] a long time with like self-objectification and over-sexualization, so this [OnlyFans experience] really fed into that self-fulfilling prophecy that I was making for myself and really built on negative narratives I had about myself worth and my body and what I deserve from relationships offline.

Importantly, Amy noted that she felt if she were to currently create an OnlyFans it would not have such a bad impact on her self-image as she has worked on her mental health and has more supportive relationships. She explained that creating content on OnlyFans could be a positive experience: “In the right head space, you could make a lot of strides towards figuring out your sexuality and figuring out what you do and don’t like in a safe area.”

Beyond simply managing stigma, some sex workers employ “reframing techniques to describe their work in positive terms, such as making connections between sex work and empowering outcomes in their lives or pointing to elements of sex work that are useful for society at large” (Benoit et al 2017: 3). Reframing is described as the opposite of the internalization, in which sex workers refute the stigma associated with their occupation. Some of my participants discussed the confidence and sexual empowerment they gained from their time as OnlyFans creators as positive outcomes of the work.

Brooke: I feel that overall, it is empowering, which kept me in it for so long and what got me into it so quickly. I am someone who grew up very insecure and I absolutely hated everything about the way that I looked growing up, and that didn’t change until college. So going from that to posing a certain way... It’s always been very easy for me, like I was already modeling and seeing the way people react to you is empowering. I mean just the attention is empowering to me. That maybe because I grew up wanting no one to look at me, so I felt empowered by having *everyone* look at me.

Janelle: I find it empowering, I have been able to fall in love with myself and who I am. It has boosted my confidence levels; I went from being shy and awkward to just feeling more confident about myself.

Sadie: I had messed up teeth growing up and people used to say I was ugly. Then, in high school and college I was a little punk-rock chick, so I had like a mohawk and stuff like that. I got confidence from being in charge of myself and

controlling who was allowed to see me in certain lights. So, it was definitely about the attention and people validating what I already think about myself, which is like a God-complex sitting somewhere in the back of my head.

My findings align with Atkinson's (2022: 66-67) research, in which her participants noted added confidence as a benefit of creating sexually explicit content, even "if they did not create their OnlyFans account with the intention of improving their confidence."

Furthermore, a few of my participants discussed ways in which their work as OnlyFans creators is beneficial to society at large. Brooke commented that OnlyFans creators are "doing a job and fulfilling a market." Likewise, when I asked what people outside the industry should know about sex work, Amy shared "only certain people can do it well. Just like you wouldn't want me to be a surgeon, you wouldn't want people who aren't equipped to be a sex worker." As Brooke and Amy attest, individuals on OnlyFans establish their brands and may succeed in their markets. It appears that they leverage their expertise and skills to create business for themselves, which helps establish their credibility and grows their customer base, enabling them to feel good about their job performance.

OnlyFans Community and Acts of Resistance:

OnlyFans as a Site of Exploitation

Like most online sex work, OnlyFans has been framed in the mainstream media as an easy way to make money, while "uphold[ing] the neoliberal, capitalist logic of the 'individual entrepreneur'" (Felkins 2022: para. 19). However, this rhetoric fails to examine larger systems of oppression and ignores the ways in which labor is exploited within capitalism. That said, I believed it was important to examine how OnlyFans creators felt about the platform and whether they understood it to be a site of exploitation or not.

Overall, my participants explained as creators they were content with OnlyFans and while they had grievances, they would not seek out other platforms to post sexually explicit content:

Amy: While I was using OnlyFans I felt somewhere between indifferent and happy with the platform. I had some personal grievances but not enough to make me search for a different platform. Since it wasn't my livelihood, I was able to excuse a lot of the issues I had with it.

Brooke: For the most part, I was happy with the platform. I feel like they take good care of their creators. When Bella Thorne hopped on and nearly shutdown the website... that was really frustrating because it felt like OnlyFans was catering towards their higher-earning creators when that's not the case for the majority of their creators. But overall, their interface is great and its super easy to use as a creator. There's so many options, so many different things you can do for any type of creative content, not just sexual content. So, I feel like it's well-rounded for creators and everything and they're pretty quick to solve issues. I would give them a score of 9 out of 10!

Brooke's comment highlights the conflicting feelings creators may harbor towards the OnlyFans company. Brooke recognizes that the OnlyFans company has a history of catering to their high-earning, celebrity creators but at the same time notes that overall, OnlyFans takes good care of their creators.

Sadie offers insight into why creators may retain a positive outlook on OnlyFans despite having frustrations with the company.

Sadie: The more I thought about it the more I was like "Why are you [OnlyFans] taking twenty percent [of the earnings] when I'm doing all the work." However, I think it's still probably one of the best platforms out there as sex work goes and making sure you get paid [...]. Instead of charging you a monthly fee, OnlyFans charges twenty percent of your profits which is so much better than anything else

that I had been doing. Like, the fucked-up coin-system on MyCamGirl.com or Chaturbate, the conversion is horrible. You have to get like 1,000 hearts or 1,000 coins to make a dollar, that was insane. They took like fifty-five percent of earnings or something like that.

Compared to other sex work platforms, OnlyFans appears to be one of the best options when it comes to creators retaining the earnings for the work they put into their content. Despite grievances or frustrations with the platform, creators may be inclined to stay as they feel there are no other feasible options.

Moreover, participants also mentioned being pleased with OnlyFans security and safety measures:

Sadie: I think OnlyFans is the safest, as far as privacy goes. I know they have some very intense guidelines for when people want to subscribe, they have to already have their credit card in and there are disclaimers and stuff like that. There's terms and conditions you have to agree to, so it feels the safest to me.

Brooke: I really like the security measures they take to protect your identity as well as your bank information and your subscribers' information. Everyone can have as much anonymity as they want to have. You have to go through a process of verifying your identification on OnlyFans so no one can catfish on OnlyFans. I think that's awesome.

As my participants demonstrate, there are aspects to the OnlyFans platform that differentiates it from other sex work platforms and keeps creators relatively happy. The platform's accessibility, safety measures, and its comparatively low fees makes it appealing to creators.

Despite positive remarks, participants also shared concerns they had about the OnlyFans platform. A repeated grievance was the fact that following the Bella Thorne incident, creators must wait a month and have a minimum of twenty dollars in their account before they are able to access their funds. Additionally, Brooke felt the company was not forthcoming with how much

money creators would owe in taxes at the end of the year and wished they would make the tax process explicitly clear. Furthermore, Sadie noted that since there was no way for creators to obtain health insurance or a 401k plan through the company it felt unrealistic that an average person could continue to be a sexually explicit content creator long-term:

You don't get a health insurance plan or 401k plan. Someone was harassing me like "Why don't you have an OnlyFans anymore?" and I was like "Well because I work in education and because I need health insurance." We live in America where healthcare isn't supported. If I lived in Australia, I would absolutely consider it again. Free health care, so who cares! But here in the States there's things I just need and there's no backup plan unless you're really good at managing your money or investing in stocks or something that would be available to you when you're old and don't want to do sex work anymore.

The above grievances of OnlyFans from my participants are similar to those of various digital gig economy workers, in which they experience "deprivation of healthcare, unfair wages, and the lack of other support systems afforded those employed 'full-time' by tech corporations" (Uttarapong et al. 2022: 2). Pulignano (2021: para 14) adds that "non-entitlement to social security protection" of platform workers is another important aspect of non-time-based unpaid labor. Just as Sadie described, U.S.-based OnlyFans creators have no governmental support or assistance from the platform itself. This may be alright for creators in the short term or for those who use OnlyFans as a side-hustle, but for creators who solely rely on OnlyFans for their income, this lack of benefits leaves them in a precarious position.

Beyond the common issues faced by digital gig platform workers, most of my participants reported that they did not feel that OnlyFans was fully supportive of sex workers on the platform. When I asked for further explanation, they noted that the announcement regarding OnlyFans banning sexually explicit content displayed the company's true feelings about sex

workers using their platform. Chloe remarked “If they were supportive of explicit content creators, they would not have placed a ban on such content in the first place.” The sexually explicit content ban is an example of a type of structural violence against sex workers known as “de-platforming” in which a person or group is prevented from posting on a public forum. De-platforming prevents sex workers from accessing resources used by the general population, such as “social media platforms, bank accounts, and financial technologies” (Blunt as cited in Atkinson 2022: 81).

My participants understood the proposed ban to be violent and exploitative as OnlyFans would not be successful without the work of sex workers:

Amy: It [the ban] was just so disrespectful and borderline dehumanizing because obviously the sex worker community has built up the OnlyFans platform to be what it is. It’s the only platform of its kind that has the name recognition that it does. And that obviously comes with all the money they’ve taken from sex workers. Clearly, they don’t see sex workers as people in general, let alone people that made the platform as successful as it is, which isn’t very original for like the history of sex work... but it was incredibly upsetting.

As described by Amy, OnlyFans was more than willing to discard of the sex workers that made the platform and the people behind it successful and wealthy. Amy notes that this is not new, as sex workers have historically been victims of de-platforming. My participants’ comments corroborate previous findings that report OnlyFans creators feeling heartbroken and distrust in the platform after the ban was announced (Atkinson 2022). The proposed ban was especially malicious as it occurred during a worldwide pandemic in which people came to depend on OnlyFans when digital spaces for sex workers became increasingly limited due to the consequences of FOSTA-SESTA.

Resistance to the Ban

A strong community of OnlyFans creators has been fostered across various social media platforms, in which creators provide practical advice and emotional support to one another. Previous research has shown that OnlyFans creators speak “positively about the online networks they have formed with other sex workers” (Safae 2021: 74). The following quotes from my participants demonstrate the importance the OnlyFans community had on their experiences as creators:

Janelle: There’s a thing where sex workers will post about having new content or having a sale, where we will retweet each other’s things so that we can help spread it to other audiences.

Sadie: You could share your free link with other OnlyFans creators and then you could go onto their content, like their content, comment, or whatever. This gave the illusion of increasing popularity which would increase subscriber rate, which was awesome. I really love the community because it’s so body positive, it’s so sex positive, sexuality positive, just everything. Everybody was happy to help you with whatever you were doing.

The sense of community fostered by OnlyFans creators is rare amongst workers within the digital gig economy (Safae 2021). For example, Uber or Lyft drivers may have numerous fleeting interactions with riders, but experience “fewer opportunities for work-related social encounters and the chance to participate in broader work-based communities” (Glavin, Bierman, Schieman 2021: 407). While worker-based communities may be unusual in the digital gig economy, sex workers have long relied on each other to “solicit and obtain advice, tips, and information on clients” (Atkinson 2022: 83). Like other researchers, I came across examples of the OnlyFans community across different platforms. I found multiple subreddits established by OnlyFans creators, providing space to post questions pertaining to content creation, pricing,

interacting with difficult customers, internet safety, tips for gaining subscribers, and account promotion. Other posts were dedicated to venting or expressing grievances with OnlyFans as a company in which other creators would comment and share their opinions. My findings, like those of previous researchers, demonstrate that fostering an online community is instrumental to OnlyFans creators in navigating “a precarious labor market in which they are provided few resources to succeed” as typical of the digital gig economy (Uttarapong et al. 2022: 5).

This community of OnlyFans creators became crucial during the week of August 19, 2021 in which it appeared that sexually explicit content would be banned on OnlyFans. The community rallied around each other in solidarity, expressing their anger, confusion, and fear across social media. Their voices raised awareness of the ban, garnering the attention of millions outside the OnlyFans community and the mainstream news cycle. My participants spoke on the reaction from the community of OnlyFans creators to the ban:

Chloe: There was actually an uproar about it. Everyone was completely so vocal about the ban of sexually explicit content, so I think that’s part of the reason they reversed the ban was because of the uproar about it.

Amy: I follow a lot of OnlyFans creators on TikTok, obviously everyone was upset because this was how they made money. This is how they paid rent, fed their kids, went to school, got groceries, like OnlyFans is their job and it’s being taken away from them for no rhyme or reason. Obviously, everyone was upset and encouraging subscribers to follow them to new platforms.

Brooke: People were outraged. Twitter is where I see the most of other creators’ thoughts and opinions and stuff, and people were, like I said, outraged. It was just tweet after tweet of “Why would you do that? You’re not taking care of the people that are making your platform money and that are popularizing your platform. We’re all going to run to Reddit, we’re gonna take our business elsewhere.” No one had anything good to say!

Participants explained to me that while outrage was publicly directed to the OnlyFans platform across social media, behind the scenes creators were helping one another by virtually holding spaces to grieve and vent.

Additionally, more seasoned explicit content creators were recommending other platforms that creators could move their content onto if the ban commenced.

Janelle: I know some people were panicking because some people were using OnlyFans as a full-time job. So, there was panic, there was anger, there was disappointment. Some people were already on other platforms and remained calm. They were telling others, “Hey, there’s this other platform you guys can join.”

Shortly following the outcry of content creators across social media, OnlyFans reversed its plans to ban sexually explicit content. Chloe noted that she felt their reversal was due to the uproar from the community of creators across social media, meanwhile Janelle shared that “[OnlyFans] backtracked because they were going to lose money.” Participants commented that they were worried whether OnlyFans will decide in the near future to move forward with the ban or utilize other tactics to slowly push sex workers off the platform. While fears are valid, it is encouraging that a strong virtual community of OnlyFans creators exists, in which they resist alienation by providing each other with practical and emotional support. Furthermore, as seen by their response to the proposed ban, they were able to use collective action to demand the company to listen to them.

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

This thesis used interpretive narrative analysis to learn how women college students make sense of their labor as OnlyFans creators within capitalist relations. In order to access narratives from creators, I conducted five semi-structured interviews with women who actively post explicit content on the subscription-based streaming platform OnlyFans or had prior experience with operating an OnlyFans account. I supplemented the knowledge provided by the interviews with virtual fieldnotes, in order to get a broader sense of how OnlyFans creators promote their accounts and connect with one another. Ultimately, findings suggest that the OnlyFans platform is a site of labor exploitation for sexually explicit content creators and is understood as such by undergraduate women sex workers. This is evident in the ways participants described the unpaid labor they perform and in their reactions to the sexually explicit ban planned by OnlyFans. Regarding the proposed content ban, participants shared that it became apparent that the platform was willing to profit from the labor performed by online sex workers only to turn around and abandon them as so many other platforms had done. While the ban was reversed a week later, many participants reported a continued distrust in the platform and worried they would enact the sexually explicit content ban at a later time.

Furthermore, participants were skeptical of the empowerment narrative that often accompanies conversations about OnlyFans. While some recounted that their experiences on the platform were positive and left them feeling sexually empowered, others stressed that this certainly was not a monolithic experience for all women. It was agreed upon that other woman college students should do extensive research before deciding to create content on the OnlyFans platform. Contradicting the popular discourse that frames OnlyFans as an empowering opportunity for young women to capitalize on their sexual agency, some of my participants

spoke about how they found their experiences creating explicit content to be negative for their self-image and struggled with internalized stigma.

When considering strategies to resist exploitation of sex workers, it is necessary to center the voices of sex workers themselves. I asked my participants what the ideal platform for sexually explicit content creators would look like. A common response was that the platform would employ a panel of seasoned sex workers to advocate on behalf of the sexually explicit content creators on the platform. Other ideas included stronger flagging systems for users that harass creators, better protections against piracy of creator content, and features that would recommend creators to subscribers within the platform. It was also mentioned that platforms should create a support team dedicated to answering creator questions and make mental health resources available to their creators.

Ultimately, strides need to be taken to de-stigmatize sex work as its endurance allows for the denial of worker's rights and protections. Collective resistance is a tactic that sex workers have used to work towards de-stigmatization, in which community initiatives provide space for sex workers to "share their experiences and plan collective action, which creates the medium in which change happens at a higher level" (Benoit, Jansson, Smith, Flagg 2017, p. 10). The OnlyFans creator community may be able to enact further change as they had done to resist the content ban, using collective action to advocate for better labor protections and rights for online sex workers. However, as Safaee (2021, p. 82) notes, "true liberation from labor exploitation for these creators would require a restructuring of capitalism as a whole, as well as the deconstruction of systemic discrimination which pushes some people to sex work out of financial desperation." Many creators are compelled to engage in sex work as a means of financial

survival due to the current economic system. We must work towards a more equitable society that provides good and fair opportunities for young women.

Overall, my findings expand existing literature on sex work and digital sex work, examining the specific experiences of women undergraduate students on OnlyFans. Previous research has shown that economic necessity is a primary motivating factor for entering sex work. Similarly, my participants revealed that they were motivated to create an OnlyFans account to alleviate financial hardships enhanced by the COVID-19 pandemic and subsidize costs associated with their college education. Much like other forms of sex work, it has been reported that OnlyFans creators perform unpaid labor through account promotion and emotional labor (Saffee 2021). My findings support these claims, additionally I contend that in many cases, aspects of actual content preparation goes unpaid as described by my participants. I examined ways in which OnlyFans creators perform emotional labor through both surface-acting and deep-acting, in order to maintain the authenticity required of the ‘girlfriend experience’ for their subscribers. Unfortunately, many of my participants recounted how the emotional labor required of this work left them burned out and in need of taking a break from the OnlyFans platform or they decided to quit making content all together. Management of stigma is a crucial part of sex work, I found that OnlyFans creators primarily managed stigma by carefully deciding when to disclose their status to others. Additionally, creators manage internalized stigma by separating the persona they post online and their “true” selves outside of the internet. Others used reframing techniques, in which they understood their work on OnlyFans as a positive experience and as fulfilling a societal need.

Limitations

Due to the time restraints and the difficulty of obtaining interview participants as an outsider of the group, this study contains a small sample size and is in no way representative of

the experiences of all OnlyFans creators. Additionally, this study focused on college-aged women's experiences on the platform in which all my participants identified as cis-women. Further research is needed to examine the experiences of men, non-binary, and trans creators on the OnlyFans platform. As mentioned, my outsider status as a non-sex worker and non-OnlyFans creator made it difficult to seek out potential participants and secure the trust necessary to conduct interviews. Given this, it may be more suitable for those with sex-worker experience to undertake this type of project. Offering compensation for participants' time and knowledge once I received funding for this project was helpful, and I recommend that future researchers seek to fund their studies. This type of project may be better suited for a dissertation, allotting more time to gather participants and seek their member checks of the research.

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APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM



**ILLINOIS STATE
UNIVERSITY**
Illinois' first public university

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Courtney Ebersole and Dr. Jason Whitesel from the Sociology and Anthropology Department at Illinois State University. The purpose of this study is to study the experiences of women undergraduate students who profit from self-produced explicit content on the site, OnlyFans.

Why are you being asked?

You have been asked to participate because you are a woman undergraduate student profiting from self-produced explicit content from the site, OnlyFans. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You will not be penalized if you choose to skip parts of the study, not participate, or withdraw from the study at any time.

What would you do?

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be interviewed in-person or virtually through Zoom about your involvement in online sex work. In-person interviews will be audio-recorded and virtual interviews will be audio and video-recorded through Zoom. In total, your involvement in this study will last approximately an hour and a half for an interview.

Are any risks expected?

We do not anticipate any risks beyond those that would occur in everyday life. Employment and reputation could be impacted should a breach of confidentiality occur. To reduce these risks, data will be protected.

Will your information be protected?

We will use all reasonable efforts to keep any provided personal information confidential. Recordings of interviews will be password protected and only accessible to Courtney Ebersole and identifying information will be stripped. Information that may identify you or potentially lead to reidentification will not be released to individuals that are not on the research team. Results of this study will be presented to a thesis committee and may be disseminated at public symposiums, research conferences, journal publications, and placed on ISU's research website.

However, when required by law or university policy, identifying information (including your signed consent form) may be seen or copied by authorized individuals.

We need to make you aware that in certain research studies, it is our legal and ethical responsibility to report any life-threatening situation and/or illegal activity on the ISU campus, campus-controlled locations, or involving ISU students to appropriate authorities. However, we are not seeking this type of information in our study, nor will you be asked questions about these issues.

Could your responses be used for other research?

We will not use any identifiable information from you in future research, but your deidentified information could be used for future research without additional consent from you.

Who will benefit from this study?

This research will benefit the participant and/or society because undergraduate women students have been an understudied population in the sex work industry. Additionally, this study will share the experiences of those profiting from the expanding industry of online sex work.

Whom do you contact if you have any questions?

If you have any questions about the research or wish to withdraw from the study, contact Courtney Ebersole clebers@ilstu.edu or Dr. Jason Whitesel jawhit6@ilstu.edu.

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, contact the Illinois State University Research Ethics & Compliance Office at (309) 438-5527 or IRB@ilstu.edu.

Documentation of Consent

Type your name and the date below if you are 18 or older and willing to participate in this study. You can print this form for your records.

APPENDIX B: SAMPLE INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. How did you find out about the OnlyFans platform?
 - How long have you been posting content to OnlyFans?
2. What was your initial reaction when you discovered OnlyFans?
3. What encouraged you to start producing content on OnlyFans?
4. Has the COVID-19 pandemic influenced your decision to create explicit content?
 - If yes, how so?
5. Do you post on other platforms besides OnlyFans?
 - Why or Why not?
 - Did you post explicit content before discovering OnlyFans?
6. Was the financial cost of your college education a factor in deciding to create explicit content?
 - If yes, roughly how much of your monthly earnings go to funding your education?
7. Would you say that seeking sexual pleasure influenced your decision to create explicit content?
 - If yes, has creating explicit content been a sexually positive experience?
8. Has posting explicit content changed your relationship with your sexuality and/or with your body?
 - If yes, how so?

9. What are some benefits of the work that you do?

- What are some cons?

10. How do you decide on the price of your subscription?

- How about private messages? Or tips?

11. How many posts do you make a day on OnlyFans?

- How did you decide upon this amount of content?

12. How much time do you spend prepping for content before posting? (hair, makeup, set-up, etc.,)

- Do you factor this time in when setting prices?

13. Do you promote your OnlyFans on other social media sites?

- How much time do you spend promoting your content?

14. Do you account for the amount of time you spend prepping for and promoting your content into your OnlyFans prices?

- If yes, how so?
- If no, why not?

15. In your opinion, how does one become successful on OnlyFans?

16. Would you recommend this type of work to other women college students?

- If yes, would you specifically recommend the platform OnlyFans?
- Why or why not?

17. As a creator, are you happy with OnlyFans as a platform?

- If yes, why?
- If no, why?

18. Has your opinion of OnlyFans changed at all since you joined the platform?

- If yes, how so?

18. What was your reaction to the announcement OnlyFans made in August about banning sexually explicit content?

- How did you feel after OnlyFans reversed this plan?

19. Would you describe OnlyFans as supportive of the explicit content creators on the platform?

- Why or why not?

20. In your opinion, what would your ideal platform for explicit content creators look like?

- What type of policies or practices would it maintain?

21. What do you want people outside the industry to know about online sex work?