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OnlyFans and the Platformization of Sex work

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Abstract

English

The thesis investigates the platformization of sex work. Employing a mixed methodology, including a comprehensive platform ethnography, in-depth interviews with 35 digital sex workers, and qualitative digital methods, OnlyFans is examined as a primary case study to explore how digital platforms are reshaping sexual labor. This research highlights an unprecedented process of sex work mainstreaming, blurring the lines between adult entertainment platforms and social media. Adult content creation on OnlyFans is identified as an emerging form of digital labor at the intersection of sex work, amateur pornography, and social media influencing. This labor is characterized by the monetization of pre-existing popularity, where successful integration into a broader ecosystem of interconnected platforms is crucial for earning income, often outweighing the importance of sexual content production itself. The analysis of OnlyFans creators' work focuses on three key dimensions. First, it explores the legitimation and subsequent normalization of the economic aspect of intimate relationships. Second, it examines creators' paradoxical relationship with the concept of work, as participants often frame their activities as a rejection of traditional employment while simultaneously investing significant time and effort that exceeds the conventional boundaries of employed work. This leads to complex tensions between perceived empowerment and underlying precarity. Finally, the central role of self-branding in adult content creators' work is highlighted. The concept of affordance-driven cross-platform dependency is introduced to capture how OnlyFans' specific features compel creators to utilize a wide range of social media platforms for self-promotion. Consequently, creators are often required to engage in unpaid content production across a broad ecosystem of social media platforms to maintain a financial relationship with OnlyFans. This contributes to the reframing of sex work as self-branding labor, complicated by the stigmatizing approach to sexuality of social media content moderation policies, leading to complex tensions between workers' infrastructural dependency and potential exclusion.

Italian

Questa tesi indaga la piattaforma del lavoro sessuale, adottando una metodologia mista che include un'etnografia immersiva della piattaforma OnlyFans, interviste approfondite con 35 sex worker digitali e metodi digitali qualitativi. OnlyFans viene esaminato come un caso di studio primario per esplorare come le piattaforme digitali stiano rimodellando il lavoro sessuale. La ricerca evidenzia un processo senza precedenti di mainstreaming del lavoro sessuale, che offusca i confini tra piattaforme di intrattenimento per adulti e social media. La creazione di contenuti per adulti su OnlyFans viene identificata come una forma emergente di lavoro digitale all'incrocio tra lavoro sessuale, pornografia amatoriale e le attività degli influencer sui social media. Il lavoro dei creatori di OnlyFans è caratterizzato dalla monetizzazione di una popolarità preesistente, dove l'efficace integrazione in un ecosistema più ampio di piattaforme interconnesse è fondamentale per generare reddito, spesso superando l'importanza della produzione di contenuti sessuali in sé. L'analisi del lavoro dei creatori di OnlyFans si concentra su tre dimensioni chiave. Viene, innanzitutto, identificato un processo di legittimazione dell'aspetto economico delle relazioni intime. Inoltre, una relazione paradossale con il concetto di lavoro, dal momento che creatori di contenuti spesso definiscono le loro attività come un rifiuto del lavoro tradizionale, pur investendo contemporaneamente tempo e sforzi significativi che superano i confini convenzionali del lavoro impiegato. Ciò porta a complesse tensioni tra il senso di autonomia percepito e la precarietà sottostante. In ultimo, il ruolo centrale del self-branding nel lavoro dei creatori di contenuti per adulti viene evidenziato. Il concetto di *affordance-driven cross-platform dependency* viene introdotto per catturare come le caratteristiche specifiche di OnlyFans obbligano i creatori a utilizzare un'ampia gamma di piattaforme di social media per l'autopromozione. Di conseguenza, i creatori sono spesso tenuti a impegnarsi nella produzione di contenuti non retribuiti su un'ampia gamma di piattaforme di social media per mantenere un rapporto finanziario con OnlyFans. Questo contribuisce a una riformulazione del lavoro sessuale come lavoro di self-

branding, processo complicato dall'approccio stigmatizzante alla sessualità che caratterizza le politiche di moderazione dei contenuti sui social media. Ciò porta a complesse tensioni tra la dipendenza infrastrutturale dei lavoratori e la potenziale esclusione dall'ecosistema di piattaforme a cui sono inevitabilmente legati.

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Introduction

Digital platforms have penetrated several spheres of work and consumption, including sexual commerce, leading to the emergence of new forms of intimacy on demand. In this context, one of the most famous and used is OnlyFans, a platform launched in 2016 for the production of creative content, operating according to a digital patronage system similar to other platforms like Youtube, Patreon, Twitch, and Facebook. Digital patronage is a business strategy alternative to advertising, consisting of financially supporting content creators to promote their creative expression, using a platform that provides the infrastructure to monetize production. The penetration of digital technologies has thus profoundly reconfigured paid sex, making the work experience seemingly manageable and safe, but also decidedly pervasive and psychologically impacting.

This research investigates sex work on the digital platform OnlyFans. What emerges is a varied picture whose constants are emotional and relational labor, the continuous need for promotion and innovation, and the challenges to navigate the constant risks of deplatformization. The particularity of OnlyFans lies in its innovative infrastructure for the monetization of sexually explicit content, which have made the platform a point of reference for the production of amateur pornography, despite the platform's communicative efforts to present itself as nothing different than a paid social media. From the audience's perspective, the platform's popularity is due to several factors: the participation of non-professional performers, the wide heterogeneity of creators (with the birth of market niches based on specific aesthetic characteristics or cultural interests), the possibility of purchasing personalized content, and the atmosphere of disintermediation and idealized intimacy characterizing interactions between workers and clients.

The platform's mechanism is based on the monetization of pre-existing popularity, as is evident in the design that does not include an internal search engine, a common feature of other platforms. Profiles are only visitable through direct links found outside. These links are then spread by creators

through social media through an intricate system of links. The figure of the OnlyFans creator thus seems to reflect the emergence of a particular form of micro-celebrity, based not so much on certain characteristics or individual skills, but paradoxically on popularity itself, as in the context of the platform it is precisely the popularity gained elsewhere that determines the visibility and therefore the earning prospects of a creator. Creators must, therefore, exploit a vast ecosystem of social media to promote themselves, but this presents significant challenges as most platforms tend to exclude sexually explicit content or content thematically related to sexuality. In short, to earn on OnlyFans you have to advertise elsewhere, but if you do you risk being banned and having to start over. Creators therefore adopt the most disparate strategies to promote their OnlyFans accounts and turn social media followers into paying fans, always trying to navigate through the tight mesh of social media policies.

Therefore, although OnlyFans' dual role as infrastructure and invisible employer is common to various sectors of digital work, however, the peculiarity of work on OnlyFans lies in the need to interact with a vast ecosystem of interconnected platforms, from which the creators are equally dependent, despite the economic relationship existing only with OnlyFans. This makes the work on OnlyFans a unique case in the panorama of digital work, as creators generate value not only for OnlyFans but also through the immaterial and unpaid work performed on other platforms. This emerges as a form of digital work that sits at the intersection of sex work, amateur pornography, and social media influencing where success depends on workers' effective embeddedness in a broad ecosystem of interdependent platforms. OnlyFans thus constitutes a privileged channel for studying the reconfiguration of the sexual labor caused by the penetration of digital platforms, blurring conventional distinctions between 'gig work' and platformised creative labor.

In recent years, OnlyFans has gained unprecedented visibility compared to other adult entertainment platforms, as evidenced by the attention the media have given it. The aspect most emphasized has been the role played by the platform in providing a solution for those who have lost their jobs due to the covid-19 pandemic or have found a valid alternative to poorly paid jobs. Media narratives about the platform spread the perception of earnings obtained quickly and effortlessly, as well as the tendency towards extreme sexual performances and an indefinite sense of moral deviance associated with the involvement of young people. Regardless of the degree of alarmism of such representations, the choice to start an activity on OnlyFans is typically perceived in the common sense as a rejection of conventionally understood work, suggesting that the actions of content creators fit

into the context of a broader process of ‘great resignation’. The ethnographic research I have been conducting since 2021 aims to deconstruct such representations, highlighting the complexity of the work process on OnlyFans and demonstrating the centrality of emotional and relational forms of labor. The creators themselves express strong ambivalence in the perception of their work experience. Although in their stories there is strong emphasis on the sense of autonomy and emancipation associated with digital sex work, when questioned about the material organization of their work, it always emerges that the amount of time and energy dedicated to managing the profiles is in fact high, often significantly higher than typical dependent employment. Working on OnlyFans requires, in fact, a combination of organizational skills, communicative and relational abilities, creativity, and digital competencies. It is necessary to have a personal space and devices to produce content, a fast internet connection to interact with users and perform live shows, as well as a variety of clothing, accessories, and tools to offer always new and diversified content. But even more so, what distinguishes OnlyFans from other adult entertainment websites is the importance attributed to interpersonal relationships, to the extent that interactivity is the key valuable service to be monetized. This leads to a process of legitimation and, hence, re-embeddedness of the economic dimension of social relationships. The platform's focus on interactivity not only changes the nature of the digital intimacies but also reshapes the way economic value is derived from social interactions.

In light of the unique elements of sex work on OnlyFans above mentioned, this thesis explores the evolving landscape of digital labor entailed in adult content creation on OnlyFans. The objective is to illuminate how the unique business model and socio-technical design of digital patronage platforms (Bonifacio & Wohn, 2020) in the context of adult entertainment, contribute to shaping a distinctive configuration of digital labor which signifies a notable departure from conventional forms of digital sex work. OnlyFans is chosen as a prime example within this category due to its widespread popularity, making it the primary focus of this research, although adult webcam sites are also sites of investigation, based on the assumption that a comparison of platforms' business models and creators' experiences across platforms can lead to a deeper recognition of the distinctiveness of OnlyFans across digital landscapes for commercial sex.

The overarching aim is to contribute to a systematic conceptualization of this novel form of sexual labor within the platform economy—an area that has, until now, received limited scholarly attention. To highlight the unique characteristics of digital patronage platforms and their impact on work experiences, the discussion draws on contrasts with the primary alternative model of platform-based

sex work, namely adult webcam modelling. Through a systematic analysis of the implications of the platform's distinctive features, it will be shown that OnlyFans differs from other forms of digital sex work primarily because of three main aspects:

- the centrality of paid interactivity, which signifies a process of re-socialization of economic processes;
- the crucial role of cross-platform self-branding (Hearn, 2010), embedded in the specific affordances and design of OnlyFans, which makes creators' dependent on a broad ecosystem of interrelated platform;
- a unique combination of emotional and relational labor, which shape a work subjectivity characterized in terms of complex ambivalence between professionalism and amateurism, and empowering and precarious narratives.

The crucial distinctiveness of this emerging form of digital sex work is that, in order to engage with a financial relationship with OnlyFans, creators need to carry out unremunerated digital labor (i.e producing content for social media) (Terranova, 2000) on a wide array of platforms. This cross-platform embeddedness shapes the experience of sex work in terms of complex tensions between infrastructural dependence and exclusion. Crucially, it also repurposes adult content creators as both digital laborers (Terranova, 2000; Gandini, 2021) and platform workers (Van Doorn, 2017; Gandini, 2019), positioned at the bridge of the gig and creative economies, because they face the precarity of the former (whose survival is tied to the ability to adapt to platforms' unpredictable changes; while, at the same time, embracing empowering narratives and work ethos of the latter, taken aside the considerable earning prospects that contrasts with conventional representations of platform work and pushes for the development of original conceptualizations, which this thesis attempts to propose.

Outline

As previously explained, the purpose of the thesis is to explore the transformative impact of digital platforms on the landscape of sexual labor, with a particular focus on the unique nature of the labor that emerges from workers' interactions with the affordances OnlyFans platform, which challenges conventional categorisations found in existing platform labor scholarship (Poell et al., 2021; van Doorn, 2017). The findings presented in of the dissertation are mainly grounded in insights obtained through a three years long immersive digital ethnographic fieldwork on OnlyFans, in-depth

semi-structured interviews with 35 digital sex workers and an exploratory cross-platform analysis of the promotional posts of 100 OnlyFans content creators on Instagram and TikTok.

Following a literature review and a methodological chapter, the third chapter explores the broad reconfiguration of labor with the penetration of digital platforms and assesses how the different business models and organizational features of adult entertainment platforms affect the work experience of digital sex workers. It shows the distinctiveness of sexual labor on OnlyFans through comparisons with adult webcam platforms, supported by interface (MacLeod & McArthur, 2019) and documentary (Gorsky & Mold, 2020) analyzes and interview data. The main claim is that OnlyFans has reconfigured the economic dimension of social interactions in digital sex work through explicit economic valorisation of social interactions, established as monetizable assets.

However, another crucial distinction, is that while the main site of labor in webcam modelling is constituted by webcam platforms themselves, adult content creators are compelled to engage with multiple social media platforms to monetize their following, exemplifying the infrastructural ecology at the heart of platformization. To capture this phenomenon, the fourth chapter proposes the concept of affordance-driven *cross-platform dependency* to stress the fact that, precisely because of the platform design and the impossibility to have success without a pre-existing fanbase sexual creators cannot rely solely on OnlyFans, which is the platform they are engaged with to extract an income. On the contrary, they have to promote themselves on other platforms, such as mainstream social media, and drive followers to OnlyFans through an often intricate path. This leads to the conclusion that this kind of digital sexual workers is inevitably dependent on different platforms, both the one they earn money from and the ones they must marketize themselves on. Having identified self-branding as the core element of the work of OnlyFans creators, the chapter also investigates adult content creators' promotional use of social media platforms, by drawing on insights from interviews and a map of participants' link connections, namely the routes through which creators lead users from their social media pages to their OnlyFans profiles in the attempt of turning social media followers into paid subscribers.

Given the consensus among creators on the necessity of cross-platform promotion, the objective is to uncover how these creators navigate the unique affordances, content moderation policies, and the expectations of their audience on each platform they use for self-branding. Considerable attention is paid to understanding the subjective imaginaries that participants develop for each social media

platform, and how they interpret their respective infrastructures. As creators often highlight content moderation as a primary challenge in self-promotion, the broader objective is to dissect how this group of users manages the tension between promoting their content and adhering to platform-specific content moderation policies. As participants stress content moderation as the main challenge to self-promotion, the broad objective is to unpack of this population of users navigate the tension between promoting their content and the restriction posed by content moderation policies. To do so, it analyzes participants' creative strategies to circumvent moderation, from the use of allusive language and backup accounts to the employment of linktrees to quite literally guide their followers to their OnlyFans accounts through an entangled maze of connections across multiple platforms.

The main findings relate to the key role of Telegram, the heterogeneity of adopted strategies, and the circular nature of the connections between platforms. The argument constructed within the chapter positions cross-platform self-branding as a pivotal aspect of the work of OnlyFans creators, often overshadowing the production of sexual content itself. An exploratory cross-platform analysis of a the promotional activities of a larger sample of creators on Instagram and TikTok aims to validate the interview findings. Through an ethnographic content analysis of the posts of OnlyFans content creators on these two platforms, the goal is to understand how their visibility tactics adapt to the specific affordances, expected audiences and guidelines of Instagram and TikTok. The use of a larger sample was deemed necessary to compensate for the limited size and heterogeneity of the interview sample. Furthermore, as most of the study relies on interview data and fieldwork notes, the utilization of data produced by the subjects themselves offers the potential to broaden the analytical scope of the research. Observing creators' activities in practice contributes to address the inherent limitations of self-report, as participants' actions may not always align with their accounts.

In the fifth and final chapter, the reflection will move to the kind of workers' subjectivity emerging through digital patronage platforms. The focus will first be on the emotional dimension entailed in adult content creation, characterized by a unique combination of emotional and relational labor that challenges existing conceptualizations. The findings also stress creators' ambivalence toward their professional well-being. The emphasis on autonomy is countered by the precarity of unpredictable working hours, financial fluctuations, and blurred boundaries between professional and private life. Consequently, feelings of empowerment and frustration often coexist in participants' lived experiences, characterized by complex tensions between narratives of passion and genuine enjoyment and the precarity and fatigue experienced in practice. Lastly, since adult content creation means for

many a leisure activity progressively professionalized, a final discussion will draw on ethnographic evidence to analyze how professionalism in this field is socially constructed and understood by participants. In other words, what is at stake to be a 'good' adult content creator. Participants' narratives reveal inherent contradictions as they oscillate between portraying successful content creation as a multifaceted profession requiring specialised skills and seeing it as a natural expression of their subjective selves.

Chapter 1. Literature Review

Introduction

The increasing use of digital platforms for paid sexual exchanges implies the emergence of specific forms of intimacy on demand, which are shaped by the diverse socio-technical infrastructures of platforms and reflect a broader process of platformization of labor (Poell et al., 2021). The digital patronage platform OnlyFans can be considered as a privileged point of view to analyze the platformization of pornography and sex work, which are areas that have yet to be extensively studied. Although the two categories may be perceived as overlapping, sex work is understood here as the interactive provision of sexual services, whereas pornography refers to the production of sexual content that can be consumed asynchronously. Despite the recent proliferation of scholarship on online sex work and pornography, only few exceptions have approached them through the lens of platformization, in the sense of an infrastructural turn (Saunders, 2020; Rama et al., 2023; Stegeman, 2023). Crucially, the penetration of platforms into these spheres does not simply entail a shift in the modality of sexual service provision, but rather a profound reconfiguration of sexual labor. As observed in other sectors, the platformization of sexual commerce involves an increasing individualisation of responsibility and risk (Poell et al., 2021) and introduces a complex interplay between empowerment (due to field's perceived easiness of access) and precarity (in the sense of infrastructural dependency) in workers' narratives. The creation of adult content on OnlyFans constitutes an emerging kind of digital labor at the intersection of amateur pornography and social media influencing, where success is strictly dependent on effective embeddedness in a broad infrastructural ecosystem of platforms. This unique positioning within the platform economy can be conceived as liminal, showcasing attributes of both low-wage gig work, marked by job insecurity, and the passionate work ethos typically associated with high-skill creative work in the information economy. Furthermore, it has introduced a mainstreaming of sexuality in social media landscapes, resulting in intricate tensions with platforms' governance.

In addition, the work of adult content creation blurs the lines between digital work and entertainment in several ways. Firstly, creators' motivations for joining the platform vary widely. Some are amateurs driven by a playful desire to share content that might be censored elsewhere, while others are professional sex workers seeking to supplement their income. Some other users transition to content creation after previous involvement in different occupations, while many turn to this form of digital labor to compensate for job losses during the COVID-19 outbreaks. Additionally, a notable category comprises young creators choosing to join OnlyFans as their first profession, drawn by the prevailing hype surrounding the expectation of quick financial success achievable through the platform (Van der Nagel, 2021). Secondly, for creators to achieve success, they are often compelled not only to produce explicit content but also to integrate elements of popular subcultures (such as anime, cosplays, gaming) into their self-branding efforts (Hearn, 2010). In doing so, they channel personal interests and hobbies into the construction of their digital persona, inevitably blending their personal and professional selves. Thirdly, OnlyFans workers typically conduct all their work activities - from producing and posting content to interacting with users and advertising on social media - within their domestic spaces, repurposed as workplaces. This occurs in a context of isolation, with an intense workload that frequently exceeds the schedule of conventional employment, thereby blurring the boundaries between professional and private spheres.

This duality and multifaceted nature of adult content creation on OnlyFans make it a unique case study that bridges the scholarly traditions of digital labor (Terranova, 2000; Jarrett, 2022; Gandini, 2021) and platform (Van Doorn, 2017; Gandini, 2019; Poell et al., 2021) labor, online sex work (Cunningham et al., 2018; Sanders et al., 2017), and pornography (Saunders, 2020), as well as content creators' cultures (Cunningham & Craig, 2019; Van Driel and Dumitrica, 2021; Scolere et al., 2018; Cotter, 2018) within the ever-evolving landscape of social media ecosystems. By exploring the current state of research in these areas of inquiry, this literature review will attempt to support the conceptualization of adult content creation on OnlyFans as a distinct category of work that blurs these domains. For this purpose, it will examine the multi-layered impact of labor platformization, particularly in the context of the online sex industry. Emphasis will be placed on the gradual and progressive integration of platformization into patterns of labor, highlighting its transformative effect on labor relations and practices.

The discussion will begin with an introduction to the framework of platformization. Afterwards, as content creation on OnlyFans is conceived as a new form of digital labor, an overview of the broader

transformations of labor brought about by digital technologies and platforms will follow. To establish the case study and support its liminal positioning between sex work, pornography and social media influence, the discussion will then examine how platformization has affected the pornography and sex industries. This examination will trace the gradual transition from digital to platform-based work in both industries. To fully understand the context of OnlyFans work, an exploration of the increasing professionalisation of content creation within social media ecosystems is also essential. After presenting the existing literature on the case study, the final section will explore the complex and often ambivalent relationship between sexuality and social media, examining the implications for the infrastructural exclusion of sex workers and the wider implications for freedom of expression on the internet.

The platformization of labor and cultural production

Online platforms have become key actors in the production, distribution and circulation of cultural content, shaping the experiences of both producers and consumers. Platforms can be defined as: “(re)programmable digital infrastructures that facilitate and shape personalized interactions among end-users and complementors, organized through the systematic collection, algorithmic processing, monetization and circulation of data” (Poell et al., 2019: 3). In the last decade, the Internet environment has shifted from the proliferation of openly accessible sites of information and sociality to the dominance of social media platforms. Observers have interpreted this transition in terms of transformation from info-web to social-web, and from open to closed web, and introduced the notion of Web 2.0 to emphasise the configuration of platform-dominated internet (Rogers, 2017).

The graphical interfaces and affordances of platforms shape the way end-users interact with each other and complementors, thereby determining the possibilities and limitations of their environments (Poell et al., 2019). Rather than merely facilitating social interactions, platforms actually structure them (Gillespie, 2010, 2017), and are considered productive because users must organize their activity around the logic of proprietary platforms (Poell et al., 2019). These platforms are not neutral agents but represent specific political and economic positions, and can exercise normative power (Gillespie, 2020). The increasing importance of platforms in various industry segments has attracted scholarly attention from fields such as software studies, business studies, critical political economy, and cultural studies. The combined efforts of these disciplines have developed the framework of platformization, a theoretical lens for analyzing how platforms have become the dominant

infrastructural and economic model of the social web (Helmond, 2015: 1) and the implications of this phenomenon. Platformization refers to the “penetration of digital platforms' infrastructures, economic processes, and governmental frameworks into different economic sectors and spheres of life, as well as the reorganization of cultural practices and imaginations around these platforms” (Nieborg & Poell, 2019: 5-6). Although the framework of platformization was mainly developed in the context of cultural production (Nieborg & Poell, 2018), the concept goes beyond entertainment and encompasses a wide range of industries and fields. It involves the transformation and integration of different activities, services and interactions into digital platforms (Reuver et al., 2018). The key point is that platforms not only change the way economic transactions take place, but also influence social and cultural practices (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). This definition emphasizes the comprehensive integration of platforms into various aspects of society, including economic, cultural, and governmental frameworks (Ma, 2022; Poell et al., 2019; Dijck & Lin, 2022).

Centralization of power is a striking consequence of platformization, which is affecting the configuration of the web more broadly. Dataification is a key concept for understanding the implications of this process, illustrating how an increasing number of human practices (even those that have historically eluded quantification) are being transformed into data through platforms' expansive technological infrastructures, in the form of mobile apps, plugins, sensors, and trackers (Airoldi, 2021). Interactions with platform interfaces generate behavioral metadata that is algorithmically processed and marketed to a range of external actors, which is intimately linked to a larger process of app-ification of the web (Rogers, 2017). As platforms have pervaded a wide range of industry segments, every instance of digitally mediated behaviour in everyday life generates data that are turned into assets. The process of dataification is inseparable from commodification, as data flows are channeled in the production of services (van Dijck et al., 2019). As will become clear in the following sections on the platformization of sex work and pornography, platformization is not the same process as digitalization. The unique economic and infrastructural features of platforms distinguish them from other companies operating online. It is important to note that data collection and algorithmic sorting do not necessarily lead to dataification unless data are provided to third parties. Platforms, thus, are essentially profit-driven institutions (Poell et al., 2022).

Platforms are distinguished from other types of online companies in their operation as multi-sided markets. They facilitate dynamic exchanges of products and services by connecting consumers with a diverse range of economic agents, each representing a distinct side of the market. This

distinction is illustrated in the literature (Lobato, 2016, 2019; Poell et al., 2021) through a contrast between two prominent online environments for visual content consumption: Netflix and YouTube. Both employ algorithms to gather extensive data about users' behaviours and use this information for content recommendations. However, YouTube allows users to create and upload their own content, which is then accessible to other users and advertisers. In contrast, Netflix users can only consume the content provided by the company, whether self-created or acquired from other sources, without the possibility to upload their own content (Lobato, 2016, 2019). Therefore, under this understanding, YouTube is considered a platform, while Netflix falls under the category of a media or entertainment company (Lobato, 2016, 2019).

The framework of platformization also crucially emphasises that platforms should not be viewed as single entities but rather as parts of an integrated ecosystem. This ecosystem is an integrated environment that is hierarchical in its self-organization. Meta, for example, owns Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and other companies, each of which constitutes a platform instance that produces data to be integrated into the larger infrastructure (Nieborg & Helmond, 2019). The interdependency between platforms is dependent on infrastructural nodes of power (van Dijck et al., 2019), making nodes a crucial aspect to consider. Viewing platforms as dynamic ecosystems allows us to understand the process of infrastructural integration (Poell et al., 2022). Platforms are social constructs because their digital infrastructures shape the conditions for social interactions and economic exchange (Cohen, 2017; Coyle, 2018). In this context, infrastructures can be defined as platform databases and networks, gateways, interfaces, tools, and associated documentation for accessing these systems (Poell et al., 2022). The combination of these components enables the creation, distribution, and monetization of online products and services. The process of platformization is also believed to affect democracy since institutions, governmental actors, and public sectors increasingly rely on private platforms' infrastructures, creating a dependence on that ecosystem. An important consequence of this is the inversion of traditional power hierarchies. While societies have historically administered technological innovation, the dependence of public services on proprietary platforms suggests an opposite trend (van Dijck et al., 2019).

This study is particularly interested in the reconfiguration of labor relations. Platformization has increasingly affected a broad range of spheres of work and cultural consumption, causing a reconfiguration of production, distribution, and monetization practices based on platforms' business models, technological structures, and forms of governance (Duffy et al., 2019). As a result, cultural

commodities have become contingent on platform design (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). On the workers' side, their dependence on the infrastructures of select platforms forces them to remain up to date with the platforms' sudden changes in configuration, from technological to governmental aspects, and adapt their practices accordingly (Nieborg & Poell, 2018: 4276).

Work mediated by technologies, digital labor, and platform labor

Platforms have deeply reshaped labor practices in the last decade, especially in terms of individualization of responsibility and risks, blurring of boundaries between work and leisure, and the establishment of a self-entrepreneurial ethos. The platformization of labor has been theorized around tensions between visibility and invisibility, collective versus individual responsibility, job security and precarity, and equality and inequality (Poell et al., 2022). This section aims to examine the correlation between labor and internet technologies, encompassing the utilization of digital devices to enhance offline work, as well as the emergence of natively digital forms of labor, according to the sociological literature on these subjects.

The presence bleed of digitally mediated work

Digital technologies have had a significant impact on the experience of work even before the rise of digital platforms. The ubiquity of online connectivity has extended the labor process beyond traditional workspaces and hours (Gregg, 2011). According to Gregg's extensive study of the creative and informational industries, the availability of online technologies in the home environment has allowed organizations to extract additional symbolic labor from employees, without a definite distinction between work hours and leisure time, being a consistent part of work tasks performed in the domestic sphere due to the availability of portable technological devices. Workers' mixed feelings about managing emails outside of formal working hours exemplify the blurred definition of work, justified by a conception of work emails as somewhat preparatory activity for work, for which the worker is individually responsible, but not as constituting a work task themselves (Gregg, 2011). The potential to work beyond the traditional working day, enabled by online technologies, coupled with an ethos of passion, self-commitment, and identification with one's professional identity, creates what Gregg (2011) calls "the middle-class infatuation with work" (p. xi), which becomes a "proven source of personal esteem" (p. xii). The pressure of cultivating professional relationships outside office hours, exacerbated by social media, could be also experienced as additional labor and as an invisible form of surveillance. Thereby, the influence of digital technology and the post-industrial ideology of passion

for the job has blurred the boundaries between work and private life, extended the labor process beyond traditional workspaces and hours, and intensified the middle-class infatuation with work, causing the ‘presence bleed’ of contemporary office culture penetrating on spheres once conceived as personal and private (Gregg, 2011: 19).

The effort to understand these dynamics has restored centrality to the concept of emotional labor, which refers to the invisible work required to manage and display emotions in the workplace (Hochschild, 1983). Workers in many service-oriented industries, such as hospitality, healthcare, and customer service, are expected to manage their own and their clients’ emotion in ways that are consistent with their organization's desired image. Emotional labor can take place in two ways: ‘surface acting’; on the one hand, refers to the superficial display of emotions with the individual being aware that the expression of positive feeling does not reflect their inner state; ‘deep acting, on the other hand, implies workers’ effort to shape their emotional states to match the desired outward display of emotions. For example, a flight attendant who is feeling stressed or anxious may actively try to calm themselves down and feel more positive emotions in order to appear cheerful and helpful to passengers. Workers who engage in emotional labor are required to constantly monitor their own feelings and the feelings of others, which is why it can be experienced as mentally and emotionally draining and linked to a sense of alienation from workers’ own emotional life. Emotional labor has become an increasingly relevant concept due to the proliferation of service work in post-industrial capitalism (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). This concept has been applied to various working relationships, ranging from commercial sex (Chapkis, 1997) to platform labor (Gandini, 2019). Contemporary capitalist society is characterized by an intensive overlapping between the commercial and intimate spheres, leading to the identification of a process of commodification of intimacy as central (Zelizer, 2005). In this context, the notion of emotional capitalism (Illouz, 2007) has emerged to highlight the centrality of emotions in post-industrial capitalism. While emotional labor is typically understood as the management of emotions by workers, the concept of emotional capitalism emphasizes that emotions themselves have become commodities that are subject to evaluation, inspection, discussion, bargaining, and quantification (Illouz, 2017).

The impact of digital technologies on the experience of work has been extensively analyzed, particularly in relation to cultural workers in the creative class (Gandini, 2016; Duffy, 2016, 2017). However, Ticona's (2022) research shows that the impact of these technologies is not confined to a particular occupational class, but rather affects workers from different socio-economic backgrounds

and occupational segments. Nevertheless, class remains a fundamental variable in how the relationship between technology and work is experienced. This exploration of the use of mobile devices by both upper- and working-class workers reveals that smartphones have become a critical tool for managing work life, albeit experienced in contrasting ways. Lower class workers feel compelled to stay connected due to the flexible nature of their jobs, but often face challenges such as unreliable devices and predatory phone contacts. They develop innovative strategies to overcome these obstacles. Conversely, upper class workers use their digital privilege to create boundaries between work and home and to seek separation. The impact of digital technology on work is not exclusive to certain occupational classes but affects workers from different socio-economic backgrounds. While lower class workers are forced to adapt to the demands of their jobs by using digital technology, upper class workers have the privilege of using it to set boundaries and achieve a better work-life balance. Both categories use creativity and personal industriousness to cope with the particular forms of precarity created by the connectivity demands of their work lives. The conceptualisation of work as ‘hustle’ accurately captures the ubiquity of precariousness across high-wage and low-income jobs (Ticona, 2022). The widespread availability of internet tools has led to a growing dependence on technology across various professions. However, it is worth examining the distinct forms of work that emerge within digital environments, such as digital labor and platform labor. These new configurations of labor are shaped by the unique features of digital platforms and the internet, which have revolutionized the ways in which work is performed, organized, and compensated. Analysing these forms of labor helps us to reflect on the evolving relationship between technology and work in the contemporary era.

The digital labor debate

The outcome of datafication is that all human activities carried out on a platform produce value that is commodified by the company owning the platform (van Dijck, 2013), a process recognized as central in contemporary capitalism (Airoldi, 2021). The concept of digital labor was developed in the early 2000s precisely to account for this process of appropriation of unpaid leisure activities of online users by social media companies (Gandini, 2021). The original formulation of the concept relies on Marxist’s theory of value to demonstrate that spontaneous, unremunerated, leisure-driven user practices constitute work and thus are subject to exploitation (Terranova, 2000). The concept seems to be closely linked to that of immaterial labor (Lazzarato, 1996). Immaterial labor can be viewed as an encompassing concept capturing all forms of non-physical value production, which is “centred in

alienable dispositions such as knowledge, affect, emotion, or relationships” (Jarrett, 2022: 10). It can take two different forms: it can be related to the production of “ideas, symbols, codes, texts, linguistic figures, images and other information products”, or it can be affective, that is, it can be related to the production and manipulation of affects, social networks and forms of community (Hardt & Negri, 2000). Terranova (2000) has identified social media as a site of affective labor. As a result, platforms integrate elements of affective intensity into their design in order to maintain user engagement. Although users’ affective investment is voluntary and unpaid, it can be understood as labor because it involves the creation of monetary value. Immaterial labor is considered to be unevenly distributed in terms of gender, with men predominantly involved in informational labor (i.e game developing) whereas women in affective labor (i.e content curation and moderation), is ascribed the same social invisibility which has historically characterized ‘women’s work’ (Poell et al., 2022), and is intimately linked to the ‘feminization of work’ in contemporary capitalism. This is not only in the sense of the increasing inclusion of women as paid laborers and the rising importance of services in economic systems but also because of the ‘feminine skills’ of flexibility and constant adaptability demanded within current precarious employment systems, including those of digital media industries. The metaphor of the ‘digital housewife’ aims to capture this aspect at the core unequal division of digital labor (Jarrett, 2015: 15). Creative work on social media often revolves around subjectivity, embodiment and intimacy, and takes place in intimate domestic spaces. As a result, it tends to be associated with the feminised realm of social reproduction and is often deemed unproductive by conventional labor standards, which are typically masculinised (Jarrett, 2022: 24), because of historical gendered distinctions between public and private activities.

Yet, the popularity of the concept has led to its association with a broad range of relationships of labor (both paid and unpaid) and technology that are essentially distinctive from one another. At the core of this critique is that the production of value from leisure-driven users’ activities (the original definition of digital labor) cannot be equated to a direct capital-labor relationship with a platform – accordingly defined as platform labor (van Doorn, 2017). If the concept of digital labor is extended to the latter, it may become too generic to allow for analytical or critical depth, which is why it has been provocatively criticized as an ‘empty signifier’ (Gandini, 2021: 2). Jarrett (2022) has contributed to the debate by proposing a systematic typology of digital labor in an attempt to overcome the ‘obviousness’ of the concept (Jarrett, 2022: 6). Digital labor is first defined in terms of exclusions, clarifying what phenomena the concept does not refer to. First, forms of labor that rely on digital tools are excluded from the definition, because given the pervasiveness of technology, virtually all

occupations may fit, to some extent, within the category. According to the same reasoning, occupational sectors that have been somewhat transformed by technology are also excluded, because “there is still a remarkable diversity, within each single digital labor sector in terms of work activity, products and contractual relations that make this a challenge” (2022: 9). Activities that produce digital commodities are also not regarded as digital labor. This final rejection has been criticized for contradicting the original Marxist formulation of the concept (Goodwin, 2022). The author’s proposed typology appears to contest the conceptual distinction between paid and unpaid labor, as she attempts to establish digital labor as comprising “Three broadly defined categories of workers” who operate “within the digital media industry” (Jarrett, 2022: 22). The categories of digital labor are: user labor (unremunerated activity on social media), platform-mediated workers, who are directly employed by intermediating platforms – including “creative and technical workers in the social media economy such as influencers, webcammers, beauty bloggers and live-streamers” – and workers formally employed by platforms, either in skilled or unskilled positions (Jarrett, 2022: 22-26). The inclusion of such diverse experiences within a single definition seems to confirm the critique that, because of its extensive and somewhat generic use, the explanatory potential of the concept of digital labor may be lost (Gandini, 2021; Goodwin, 2022).

Being this study concerned with forms of work that place directly on platforms (the second category of Jarrett’s (2022) typology), from now the focus will be on the notion of platform labor which, as previously clarified, is distinguished from digital labor for the existence of a direct capital-labor relationship with a digital platform which exercises control and surveillance over the worker (Gandini, 2019).

Platform labor

Platform or 'gig' work exists on a continuum of various forms of employment relationships, where digital platforms constitute both shadow employers and market intermediaries (Friedman, 2014) while, at the same time, rejecting their role as employers by appointing workers as independent contractors (Van Doorn, 2017). The opacity of the relationship is functional for platforms to establish their immunity from legal liability for precarious working conditions and lacking social protection which characterize the experience of platform workers (Van Doorn, 2017). Such immunity is obtained mainly via three strategies. Firstly, platforms’ Terms of Service (ToS) agreements are usually formulated in ways that imply a high level of unilateral discretion to the platform owner, because they can be modified at any time and allow for the termination of workers' accounts. Secondly, platforms

foster information asymmetries that benefit buyers rather than providers of services, as workers have limited information until they commit to the gig. A third strategy further hinders worker empowerment by mobilizing outsourced 'customer service representatives (CSRs) and algorithmic management systems to shield platform owners from having to deal directly with service providers (Van Doorn, 2017: 902-903).

The Marxist framework of labor process theory has been proposed as a heuristic tool to identify the key features of working through and for a digital platform (Gandini, 2019). Particular attention is paid to the shifts in the point of production, the centrality of emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983) in the gig economy, and the managerial control exercised by platforms (Gandini, 2019). As gig work is not tied to a physical workplace, platforms 'represent a distinctive, digitally based point of production in that platforms reuse and fence off the social relations involved in gig work, thereby transforming them into relations of production' (Gandini, 2019: 1044). The elements of emotional labor and managerial control are intertwined, as in Hochschild's (1983) original theorisation of the concept. What is novel about this application of emotional labor is the key role of metrics. Despite denying the existence of an employment relationship, platforms exercise techno-normative control and surveillance over workers through features such as rankings, feedback and rating systems embedded in the technological infrastructure. These metrics are transformed into reputational scores that determine the visibility of workers on the platforms' interfaces and thus their ability to attract customers (Gandini, 2019). Platforms are often not transparent about their ranking criteria, which can lead workers to develop their own creative strategies to succeed. This is related to the importance of adaptability in platform work. Indeed, platform workers need to be highly flexible in order to adapt to frequent and often opaque changes in platform infrastructure and governance in an ongoing trial-and-error process that can be frustrating and exhausting (Poell et al., 2021: 114). As a result of these issues, a wide range of research on the platformization of labor has interpreted it in terms of precarity, individualisation and systematic inequalities (Poell et al., 2021; Ticona & Mateescu, 2018; Fetterolf, 2022; Van Doorn, 2017).

Scholarship on platform work has followed two distinct trajectories. The first trajectory concerns the analysis of low-paid 'gig' work, which can either be contracted through a platform and subsequently performed on-site, such as the work of drivers, couriers, and cleaners, among others (Ticona & Maatescu, 2018; Ticona et al., 2018; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016; Fetterolf, 2022), or entirely online, such as Amazon Mechanical Turk, which is considered a prime example of the precarisation

and individualisation of the labor market (Van Doorn & Velthuis, 2018). The second trajectory focuses on the labor of content creators and cultural workers in the information economy (Cunningham & Craig, 2019; Baym, 2015; Duffy, 2017). Here, the emphasis lies on the activities of sex workers in the platform economy. It is crucial to note that not all forms of platform-dependent cultural work discussed in the literature above can be considered platform work in the sense of a capital-labor relationship. However, the increasing pervasiveness of the self-entrepreneurial ethos across various industries has made self-branding a prerequisite for access to work (Gandini, 2016; Duffy, 2017). Self-branding involves a "form of affective, immaterial labor purposefully undertaken by individuals in order to garner attention, reputation, and, potentially, profit" (Hearn, 2010: 427). Since social media is a privileged site for self-branding (Scolere et al., 2018), the link between online visibility and professional opportunities has indirectly platformed many forms of work, even if they do not involve platform-dependent production practices (Poell et al., 2022).

The music industry provides a good example of this tension. At first glance, music producers seem to be unaffected by platformization, as their income is derived from concerts and sales. However, given the increasing emphasis on interconnectivity, musicians need to 'foster and maintain ongoing interactions with their audiences' (Baym, 2015: 2). Accordingly, the concept of relational labor, which was developed in the context of the music industry but can be applied to various fields of creative work, describes "an investment in building and maintaining an audience that will sustain a career" (Baym, 2015: 14). In other words, cultural workers undertake activities to foster ongoing connections with their audiences and build social relationships that can enable paid work. Relational labor differs from emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983), which refers to emotional management that takes place during an interaction, as relational labor is an ongoing process (Baym, 2015). These relational activities are aimed at achieving material gains, although it is uncertain whether these gains will actually materialise. Research on the creative industries has highlighted that success and concrete employment are exceptional, as the vast majority of aspiring workers remain invisible. The notion of aspirational labor captures how would-be creative workers 'generate cultural content on their own time and money in the hope that it will eventually lead to recognition and remuneration' (Duffy, 2016: 443). Although it seems close to the concept of relational labor, at the heart of the idea of aspirational labor is the uncertainty of outcomes. Another key element of aspirational labor that distinguishes it from similar conceptualisations - hope labor (Kuehn and Corrigan, 2013), venture labor (Neff, 2012) and relational labor (Baym, 2015) - is the exquisitely gendered connotation ascribed to it. Indeed, the

unremunerated production of social media content is predominantly undertaken by women (Duffy, 2017), which seems to support the metaphor of the 'digital housewife' (Jarrett, 2015).

This section has delved into the transformative changes introduced by platformization, aiming to trace the evolving relationship between labor and technology over the past decade. The discussion has progressed from the blurring of work times and spaces facilitated by home internet access and devices to the nuanced convergence of work and leisure intrinsic in digital labor. Lastly, it explored the genesis of entirely new forms of employment emerging from platformization. The upcoming sections will delve into the evolving interplay between internet technologies and the realms of pornography and sex work, respectively. Recognizing that platformization is not an abrupt occurrence but rather a gradual process of integration, the analysis will commence by examining the digitalization of these industries, followed by their subsequent platformization.

Pornography and sex work from digital landscapes to the platform economy

The technological evolution of pornography

Pornography refers to the verbal or visual representation of sexual behaviour or the sexualized representation of body parts, which deliberately violates socially or morally accepted taboos, with the purpose to provoke sexual arousal (Hunt, 1993). It can be understood as a media genre built around "hyperbolic depictions of social categories and scenarios where the relations between people, objects and the environment are markedly sexual" (Paasonen, 2011: 3). As a representation, it produces an affective impact through "visceral audience engagement" (Kipnis, 1999: 161). Pornography has the utmost relevance for digital economies and users' everyday digital practices. Just as other popular media objects, it constitutes a perspective from which to observe the ways in which ideas about gender, race, beauty, and sexuality are constructed and communicated in certain societies during different historical periods (see, for example, Attwood, 2005; Dines, 2010). In this sense, it could be appreciated as a mirror/laboratory of cultural transformations. Porn is also a subject of legislation, legal processes, and public debate, and is at the centre of controversies regarding freedom of expression and censorship. Being a private practice, which is invested in public relevance, pornography is a sociological phenomenon through which we can investigate contemporary fashions, customs, and cultural trends.

The introduction of concepts such as 'pornification' (Paul, 2005), 'pornographication' (McNair, 1996; Driver, 2004), 'mainstreaming of pornography,' and 'porno chic' (McNair, 2002) refers to the idea that a process of sexualization of culture is taking place in contemporary Western societies, that is a general increase in the visibility of sexually explicit representations which is blurring the boundaries between the pornographic and the mainstream. At the core of the process, there is a flux between porn stardom and mainstream celebrity status, as the aesthetic repertoire of commercial porn penetrates other fields of media cultures a commodification of sexuality aimed at marketing other products (Paasonen et al., 2007). The process has been described as: "contemporary preoccupation with sexual values, practices, and identities; the public shift to more permissive sexual attitudes; the proliferation of sexual texts; the emergence of new forms of sexual experience; the apparent breakdown of rules, categories, and regulations designed to keep obscene at bay; our fondness for scandals, controversies, and panics around sex" (Attwood, 2006: 78-9). Not all pornography, however, is ascribed such visibility, as pornification involves the appropriation of elements of soft-core, with its predictable gender poses and scenarios, and heterosexual relationships and standard bodily forms (Reichert & Lambiase, 2006).

Porn has been theorized as a multifaceted assemblage, a definition which highlights its multiple roles as a media genre in rapid transformation, a field of labor, a drive of technological development, an object of regulatory interventions, and at the centre of societal moral panics (Tiidenberg & Van der Nagel, 2020; Paasonen et al., 2019; Paasonen, 2011). Nonetheless, until recent years, it tended to be overlooked by digital sociology and media studies scholarships (Paasonen, 2011). For decades, scholarly debates around porn have been strongly polarized, reflecting the legacy of the feminist 'sex wars' of the 1970s and 1980s (Jones, 2016). Radical antiporn feminists criticized the porn industry as uniquely oppressive toward women and advocated for its abolition. According to this perspective, any pornographic representation reinforces male hegemony and is inextricably linked to gender violence, as Morgan's slogan 'porn is the theory, race is the practice' suggests. In contrast, anti-antiporn intellectuals in the early 1990s opposed censorship on the basis of principles of sexual freedom and diversity, claiming the value of porn as a site of self-expression, creative representation, and subcultural productions (Paasonen et al., 2007). Nevertheless, this stream of research tended to focus exclusively on alternative, queer porn subcultures, while discrediting mainstream commercial porn in its entirety, despite its widespread consumption (Paasonen, 2011). Moreover, until recently, pornography scholarship has focused primarily on issues of representation, with limited attention to production and consumption practices (Paasonen et al., 2007). While key works such as those by

Linda Williams (1999; 2004) and Feona Attwood (2002) are essential to any review of the literature on pornography, their critiques are not discussed in detail here because this research focuses on pornography as labor rather than representation. This was the tendency within the field until the contributions of Berg (2021) and Saunders (2020), who specifically analyzed pornography from a labor perspective. However, increasing attention is being paid to the intimate relationship between pornography and technology, and how this shapes the practices of both performers and viewers (Paasonen, 2011; Paasonen et al., 2019; Berg, 2021; Saunders, 2020). My research aims to combine these analytical lenses by illustrating how the infrastructural shift associated with the platformization of sexual labor has reshaped both work experiences and forms of representation.

Technological development is intertwined with profound transformations in porn's aesthetics and modes of production. This section will trace the evolution of pornography in relation to its key technological developments, with particular emphasis on how internet technologies have contributed to blurring the boundaries between production and consumption due to the rise of amateurism. First, the shift from public to private consumption, enabled by the spread of affordable camera tools and VHS, led to the emergence of amateur production, which was later appropriated by the corporate porn industry. Second, digital technologies provided ordinary users with the possibility to upload and circulate their own content online. Finally, the increasing role of platforms, whose infrastructures and forms of governance have deeply reshaped porn production and consumption. The relationship between technological innovation and the porn industry is twofold. On the one hand, technological development has transformed practices of paid intimacy for both workers and consumers. On the other hand, pornography itself has played a significant role in the development of technical innovations that are now ubiquitous in everyday life. Notably, the internet owes its infrastructure and technologies to the porn industry, including online payment systems, streaming technologies, banner advertising, and pop-ups (Paasonen et al., 2019). As such, some commentators provocatively claim that porn is not only pervasive on the internet, but it is also its very reason for being (Paasonen, 2011). The literature stresses that the evolution of pornography has blurred the distinction between amateur and professional, with the emergence of a new category known as professional amateurs (pro-am) (Paasonen, 2010). These are performers who engage in porn as a living while downplaying their professional status to appeal to their audiences. While digital technologies have seemingly disintermediated the relationship between performers and audiences, the increasing role of platforms has significantly re-mediated this relationship, leading to a comprehensive reconfiguration of work and consumption practices. Thus, to understand the technological evolution of the sex industry, it is

crucial to examine how interactions with digital technologies have altered the concepts of amateur and professional and transformed work and consumption practices.

The analogic era of porn: from the 'golden age' to 'gonzo' productions

As counterintuitive as it may seem to begin an exploration of the relationship between digital technology and pornography with analogue modes of production, the aim is to emphasise how pornographic production, like other media genres, has always been shaped by its technical supports, long before the proliferation of the Internet. The history of pornography, indeed, is inextricable to that of mass production. This media genre is thought to emerge with the development of (relatively) affordable print technology in the eighteenth century and become popular with the development of photography and the spread of mass-produced postcards in the late nineteenth century (Paasonen et al., 2007). The rise of amateur pornographic production can be traced back to the commercialization of polaroid cameras in the 1960s (Paasonen, 2011). Unlike previous tools, polaroid cameras did not require any external involvement in the imaging process. Although these erotic photos served as a precursor to amateur content creation, the emergence of amateur pornography as a distinct genre occurred in the early 1980s during the 'video revolution' (Esch & Mayer, 2007: 101). Throughout the 1970s, known as the 'golden age of porn' (Paasonen et al., 2007), printed pornography remained popular because of its accessibility and possibility of private use, while films remained tied to public consumption in cinemas.

With the advent of portable video cameras and video cassette recorders, many were able to experiment with informal porn production and distribution. In response, the porn industry sought to prevent economic losses from the success of homegrown production by attempting to assimilate it and establish it as a subgenre of commercial porn. This subgenre is called 'gonzo', inspired by the practices of 'gonzo' journalism, with its emphasis on immersive reportage and first-person storytelling, which developed in the late 1980s and early 1990s. 'Gonzo' videos are shot in mundane locations with shaky handheld cameras and typically lack complex narrative or even dialogue, with close-ups of sexual acts as their defining elements. This type of representation revolves around the principle of participant observation, where the viewer is not treated as a distant observer but is fully immersed in the scene, with a point of view identifiable with that of the male actor/ camera operator. The availability of portable cameras meant that the presence of a director and cameraman was no longer necessary, with the male actor typically assuming these roles. This is an essential aspect of the establishment of the POV aesthetic (Paasonen, 2011). The overlapping of the roles of a male actor,

cameraman and director demonstrates how the appropriation of amateur modes of production is not only functional in terms of audience appeal, but also drastically reduces production costs. 'Gonzo's' production mimics the aesthetic rawness and poor technical execution typical of informally produced amateur porn, while adhering to (or even reinforcing) mainstream conventions of gender roles and gender scripts, such as conventional poses, gestures and actions (van Doorn, 2010; Paasonen, 2010). Indeed, this subgenre is considered to be the most hardcore and misogynistic, with many critics seeing gendered violence as inherent in this form of representation (Paasonen, 2011).

The digital era of porn: interactivity, participation & diversification of content

A key stage of the evolution of amateur porn occurred with the development of digital imaging technology between the 1990s and 2000s and the expansion of the Web, which allowed users to create and exchange their own content online. The spread of digital production tools has been associated with an 'amateur revolution' (Messina, 2006). Whereas porn consumption has historically been understood as a predominantly male practice (Kendrick, 1987), the relationship with internet technologies has been interpreted in relation to a shift to a diversified public (Mazières et al., 2014). This period witnesses the establishment of reality porn, characterized by staged scenes and scenarios presented as real events, especially by claiming the non-professional status of female performers, allegedly solely motivated by a desire for sexual experimentation. The point of view can be as close as for 'gonzo', or slightly more distant. The audience is treated as passive participants or voyeurs, with actors directly addressing the camera instead of interacting with each other (Paasonen, 2011). From this stage, amateur production has become ubiquitous in online environments, facilitated by the spread of video sharing and hosting sites generally known as 'tubes'.

The evolution of online porn, also known as netporn, real core, or alt porn (Messina, 2006), has been associated with the development of particular aesthetics and ethics that are presented as a counterpoint to mainstream commercial pornography (Berg, 2021). Mainstream commercial pornography has been criticised for being inherently exploitative and uninteresting because it focuses on the representation of sexual difference as the main source of heterosexual visual pleasure, systematically addressing a male audience (van Doorn, 2011). In contrast, netporn presents itself as an alternative and somewhat authentic form of porn due to the display of non-normative bodily appearances and the emphasis on free will and 'real' pleasures as motivators for production (Berg, 2021). Messina (2006) describes it as "real people having real sex in real places", claiming to represent the unfiltered experiences of ordinary people. This kind of representation can be seen as native to the

internet, as it is grounded in the "aesthetics, technological, expressive and interactive possibilities of the medium" (Paasonen, 2010: 1299). It involves a disembodied representation created through the interaction between performers and the audience, who are ideally imagined to be the same kind of people, joined by a dialogic relationship of mutual pleasure (Shah, 2007). The evolution of amateur porn as a genre is central because it serves as a fundamental reference point for the development of online sex work and digital cultures of sexuality more broadly. The rise of this genre has turned domestic spaces into sites of both production and consumption of porn, blurring the distinction between producers and consumers within a 'gift economy' of peer-to-peer exchanges (Paasonen, 2010). The notion of 'striptease culture' (McNair, 2002: 88) specifically refers to the increasing media visibility of nonprofessional performers appreciated by online audiences for the sense of authenticity, immediacy and ordinariness they convey. Despite the sexual nature of porn work, extra-sexual engagement plays a crucial role in audience building within digital environments. The popularity of life casting, referring to the digital broadcasting of everyday events online, reflects a growing interest in confessional genres that push for intimate spectatorship (Nayar, 2017). The interactivity of internet technologies enables the sense of interconnectedness between performers and viewers that lies at the heart of the affective intensity produced by amateur representations.

Amateur performers are typically perceived as engaging in sexual practices for personal pleasure rather than seeking material gain. In fact, they are often depicted as not performing at all, but rather engaging in private acts that would normally take place out of sight. As Paasonen (2011: 80) notes, amateur representations are considered to possess some documentary value, as their creators are thought to simply record events with the technology available to them, rather than skilfully manipulate them. These representations are therefore assumed to be expressive of the spontaneous desires of the performers, imbuing the mode of production of amateur pornography with ethical value, particularly emphasising freedom, consent, creativity, and authenticity. However, amateur representations are inevitably influenced by the aesthetic conventions of mainstream pornography, albeit in antithetical terms. As a result, normative mainstream porno-scripts remain a central reference point (van Doorn, 2011). The boundaries between mainstream and amateur pornography are rather arbitrary since no single definition of mainstream exists. To be recognised as such by viewers, porn content must conform to familiar categories within the viewer's imagination (Paasonen, 2011). Therefore, amateur content may adopt the common conventions of commercial porn, while asserting its distinctiveness mainly through poor technical execution and the exhibition of imperfect bodies (Paasonen, 2010; van Doorn, 2010). Although amateur aesthetics are presented as expressive of a form of ethics, its

uniqueness may remain limited to aesthetics without effectively challenging the production practices of mainstream porn. Extensive empirical work has shown that alternative porn websites often do not significantly differ from commercial ones, except for their claim of free accessibility (van Doorn, 2011). However, the free accessibility of content does not necessarily indicate ethical production practices, rendering hierarchies of value between commercial and non-commercial products inherently questionable (Ray, 2008). There is evidence that performers in alternative porn productions are paid less on average than those participating in mainstream porn. The emphasis on performers being motivated by free pleasure over monetary gain presents the risk of denying the labor behind their work and thus justifying performers' exploitation (Berg, 2021).

It has been questioned, therefore, how such demands for authenticity affect the work experience of amateur porn performers. The emphasis on authenticity in pornography is viewed as reflective of broader transformations of late post-industrial capitalism, where work becomes invested in particular ethics of passion and committed self-identification with work (Berg, 2021). Given the contested status of pornography and sex work, claims of authenticity are also functional in contesting stigma and victimization of workers, as it denies any forms of coercion taking place, even indirectly through monetary compensation. It is important to clarify that critics of porn and sex work view any form of paid intimate services as coercive and exploitative because workers' agency would be inherently constrained by their material needs (Berg, 2021). This distinction between instrumental and authentic exchanges is also discursively employed to separate the categories of 'sex work' and 'prostitution'. While sex workers are portrayed as middle-class educated subjects who engage with paid sex because they wish to do so, prostitutes are thought to be only motivated by material scarcity. In this sense, claims of authenticity become functional in asserting privileged status in what has been called a 'whorearchy', namely an implicit class system among sex workers, with content creators on adult entertainment platforms at the top and street hookers at the bottom (Berg, 2021). Moreover, employing the very notion of authenticity is questionable because it does not represent a clearly defined mode of behaviour, but is rather a social construct that requires 'authenticity work' to maintain (Paterson, 2005).

Authenticity may be defined as a performance of "wanting to be there emphatically, not just for the money" (Berg, 2021: 45), which requires intensive emotional labor (Hoschild, 1983) and relational labor (Baym, 2015?). Porn performers, therefore, fulfil authenticity demands by emphasizing their genuine commitment to the production, which implies additional emotional

management. In fact, the performance of authenticity constitutes a form of emotional labor itself and constrains workers' ability to negotiate other aspects of the work, such as financial compensation and working hours (Berg, 2021). The assertion of authenticity as the core element of amateur porn production has an extractive function because it allows producers to pay low wages to performers on the assumption that they are not motivated by monetary goals but rather perform for the fun of it (emphasis mine). Saunders (2020) has interpreted the relationship between pornography and digital modes of production in terms of shifting attitudes concerning the laboring body. While analogic porn productions used to have a strong narrative dimension, contemporary mainstream online porn, as "a spectacle of rapidly executed and highly precise movement" (Saunders, 2022: 99) is characterized by instantaneity and acceleration, making it akin to a performance of laboring bodies. This element challenges the historical interpretation of porn as a "luxurious rejection of [...] productive work" (Saunders, 2022: 99) by repurposing sexual performance as capitalist hard work. Alternative pornographies stand in direct opposition to this kind of representation with 'slow' modes of production invested with ethical significance. However, it has been noted that the emphasis on authenticity may imply that performers gain compensation from their own pleasure, which clearly establishes the conditions for exploitation (Saunders, 2022).

To sum up, Internet technologies have had a profound impact on the production and distribution of pornography, affecting its aesthetics, economic structures, and the lived experiences of workers and consumers. The proliferation of digital production tools and online networks has led to a significant increase in the accessibility, variety, and visibility of pornography. In Western societies, around a quarter of Internet users access pornography through the Web, facilitated by anonymous participation, free access, and a wide range of genres available (Paasonen, 2011). With the advent of digital porn, the conventional binary categories of amateur and professional have become blurred, as regular users can now create and share their own content or stream it live using their webcams. This trend reflects the broader cultural shift towards 'prosuming' in contemporary web cultures.

The platformization of adult entertainment

The discussion on platformization has begun by underlying the shift from Web 1.0 to the current state of the internet, which has resulted in a consolidation of power owing to the proliferation of social media platforms (Rogers, 2017). Similarly, the porn industry has moved towards centralizing the distribution of pornography on a handful of aggregator sites, mostly owned by the MindGeek company (Tarrant, 2016; Paasonen et al., 2019). As a result of this centralization, MindGeek

possesses the authority to regulate content accessibility and manipulate user experiences and interactions without disclosing the criteria they employ to do so (Paasonen et al., 2019: 46). The diversification of work roles within the porn industry is another effect of centralization, with software developers and advertisers, in addition to performers, directors, and camera operators, contributing to the production and consumption of pornography. Notably, only the former group has a formal employment relationship with MindGeek. Algorithms also play a critical role in this process (Paasonen et al., 2019; Saunders, 2020; Rama et al., 2022).

The advent of platforms has led to sexual labor and consumption being incorporated into the information economy, where both the production and consumption of erotic content generate commodifiable data. Saunders (2020: 58) has coined the term 'sexual dataification' to describe "the economically motivated transformation of sexual desires into data that occurs through digital pornographic interfaces". By watching online porn, users generate information about their preferences and behaviours, which is then converted into valuable data through hyper categorization and objectification. A quick look at the homepages of porn websites reveals a taxonomy of pornographic content based on performers' physical attributes, sexual acts depicted in the shows, and physical settings, among other factors. Such strict thematic categorization transforms porn consumption into an emotional connection with clearly defined categories, reshaping sexual arousal in terms of information (Saunders, 2020). Notably, contemporary porn platforms often refer to themselves as databases, emphasizing the provision of organized, standardized material (Saunders, 2020). The dataification of pornography has transformed sexuality from the 'uncategorizable' (Stein, 2012: 46) to the 'hyper-categorized', with platform interfaces characterized by the searchability and comprehensibility of porn material.

The emergence of the platform economy has led to the conversion of users' attention into data, generating surplus value through the exploitation of continuous attention. Pornography consumption, therefore, represents a form of immaterial labor since users' viewing habits generate valuable information about their preferences, which in turn informs the production process. By relying on data about consumption trends, platform interfaces propose to users the type of content most likely to engage them. This continual interactivity between production and consumption explains the profitability of free porn sites in the MindGeek network, which are employed as aggregators to gather data and turn it into information commodities for sale to porn production companies. These companies then advertise their products on the same free sites, exemplifying the

infrastructural ecology at the heart of platformization (Poell et al., 2022). Discussions on digital labor have demonstrated that value extraction from users' leisure activities is part of a broader trend in human relations with digital media. What distinguishes sexual datafication, however, is the production of data assets through intimate and affectively intense practices.

Online pornography has experienced a surge in popularity, yet the content moderation policies of most online environments have placed it at the margins of the web (for instance, by restricting access to porn sites in certain locations or for certain categories of users, or by depriving the social media accounts of porn performers of visibility) (Paasonen et al., 2019). Consequently, the company MindGeek has employed various marketing strategies to rebrand porn as a respectable form of entertainment. Examples of this approach include initiatives such as 'Pornhub Insights', 'Pornhub Cares', and Pornhub's 'Sexual Wellness Centre', which consist of informational or philanthropic actions. In particular, Pornhub Insights aims to analyze evolving trends in porn consumption on the platforms belonging to the MindGeek network. The statistics present the effects of seasonal changes on porn consumption, the impact of broad political and environmental events on browsing practices, as well as the most popular themes in different countries (Saunders, 2020). Pornhub Insights manifest a celebratory view of sexual datafication and dataveillance, presented as beneficial to consumers as they allow for a better understanding of one's intimate desire and optimization of the time spent online. It can be noted, however, that Pornhub Insights lack transparency, as they present statistics on porn consumption through percentage increases without disclosing numerical data. This approach is intrinsically biased because it influences the viewer's perception of the popularity of a certain genre. The impression that a great number of users are interested in a porn category may inspire the viewer to align with the allegedly most popular choice online. Informatization, thus, has a normative element in boosting the visibility of particular genres. Furthermore, Pornhub Insights links preferences in porn consumption to general trends in other fields of cultural consumption, commonly linking users' search keywords with popular movie and TV show releases (Saunders, 2020). The idea of a pornification of society revolves around the assumption that characteristic aesthetic elements of porn have penetrated mainstream cultural production (Paasonen et al., 2007). In contrast, the datafication of pornography has transformed a range of non-sexual practices of consumerism (visual media, video games, music, fashion, etc.) into a potential repertoire of pornographic themes.

An obvious consequence is standardization of content based on criteria of popularity and predictability (Rama et al., 2021). It is important, yet, to question what kind of content comes to

constitute the standard, as that will produce, in turn, deviance. Platform-dependent porn has been criticized for heteronormativity, sexism and racialization. The tendency to heteronormativity is exemplified by the fact that bodily categorizations always focus on the female body. The proliferation of tags around female anatomical parts ('Big Tits', 'Big Beautiful Woman', 'Teen', 'Milf' etc) suggests an interpretation of femininity as knowable and amenable to meticulous physical and behavioural classification (Saunders, 2020). Such categorization of female performers mixes misogyny with racialization, with titles displaying names of nationalities next to discriminatory gendered adjectives such as 'slut', 'whore' and so on. The absence of any similar label for men performers, conversely, establishes the male body, or rather the white male body, as the norm. Not surprisingly, the only categorizations regarding male anatomical parts are intertwined with racialized features. Accordingly, quantitative analysis of the categorization practices of various online porn platforms has highlighted a biased tendency toward ethnic identity, because tags related to certain nationalities or ethnicities are systematically correlated with particular sets of sexual actions. The nationality categories attached to porn material do not mean that the video is set in a particular national space, or it is intended to appraise a certain national audience. The tags embody how a particular nationality or ethnicity is staged in a pornographic context. (Mazières et al., 2014)

A social network analysis of Pornhub tags has also shown how the algorithmic profiling of users determines content recommendation in ways that are informed by questionable conceptions of gender and sexual orientation, which in turn may contribute to reinforcing heteronormative perspectives on sexuality (Rama et al., 2022). Homosexual content can follow two paths of circulation: female homosexuality is channelled into heterosexual male desires, with the 'Lesbian' category placed alongside (thus having the same significance) as any other feminine labels (Saunders, 2020), whereas male gay and trans contents are systematically kept separate from all the rest. The fact that heterosexuality is treated as the default choice, no matter the users' self-declared sexual identity and interests, suggests the platform's biased attitude toward gender and sexual preferences (Rama et al., 2021). Such tendency of porn platforms of clustering homosexual and trans content was already underlined by the analysis carried out by Mazières and colleagues (Mazières et al., 2014). Rama and colleagues (2022), however, crucially associated the issue with the broader impact of platformization, showing that instead of cultivating diversity, the platform's algorithmic recommendation, remarkably fosters standardization. Having attempted to frame the evolving configuration of pornography as both a representation and as a form of work, resulting from the impact of digital technologies and platforms, the next section will proceed in a similar manner with regards to sex work.

The digital transformations of sex work

The sociological literature on sex work has evolved significantly in the last decades, reflecting diverse perspectives and interdisciplinary research (Skilbrei & Spanger, 2018). Paid sex has historically been understood through the lens of social deviance or the victimisation of women. Historically, sex work has been viewed through the lens of social deviance or the victimization of women. However, a paradigm shift emerged in the 1970s, driven by feminist scholars and sex workers' unions, challenging the perception of sex work as inherently exploitative and advocating for the recognition of the sale of sexual services as a legitimate form of work. This position grew out of the fierce debates of the late 1970s and 1980s, known as the 'sex wars', in which feminist thinkers were divided. Some rejected the equation of providing sexual entertainment with work, arguing that selling sex was tantamount to selling one's identity, while sex workers' rights advocates, influenced by Marxist principles, argued that all work involved selling one's body, presenting sex work as akin to all service work. This latter perspective triumphed, ultimately shaping academic research and fostering a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon. However, it is important to note that the perspectives of so-called pro-sex work activists and sex worker-led organisations continue to struggle for full recognition and influence in policy making. The SESTA-FOSTA legislative process, which has had a significant impact on those working in the sex trade both online and offline, illustrates the ongoing challenges that pro-sex work perspectives face in ensuring adequate representation and effectiveness in public policy.

Emotional labor, posited by Hochschild (1983), as the management of feelings to create a publicly observable display for professional purposes, has emerged a central framework for understanding sex work. This perspective stresses that individuals in the sex work industry engage in performances that aim to convey emotional authenticity, with the objective of satisfying and retaining their clients (Chapkis, 1997; Sanders, 2005). Another key concept in the scholarly critique on sex work is that of bodywork, which frames sexual commerce as activities in which workers both perform work on their own bodies and provide services that involve work on the bodies of others (Wolkowitz et al., 2013). Informed by these analytical perspectives, a growing body of literature has contributed to a comprehensive understanding of commercial sex across different segments of the sex industry and in diverse geographical contexts. Interdisciplinary research has sought to uncover the complexities of sexual commerce by addressing its legal aspects (Platt et al., 2018), the occupational health of workers (Alexander, 1998) and the impact on their personal and family relationships

(Bellhouse et al., 2015), among other topics of interest, across the various segments of the sex industry and in different geographical contexts (Wonders & Michalowski, 2001).

In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to the shift to online work. The rise of internet technologies has indeed revolutionized the world of sexual commerce, causing various commentators to predict a significant shift of sex work towards online spaces (Cunningham & Kendall, 2011; Jones, 2015; Sanders et al., 2018). While sex workers have long utilized the internet to screen clients, advertise their services, and share information, the development of streaming technology and digital payment systems has introduced a range of new on-demand sexual services that take place entirely online. Digital sex work is thus defined as the provision of sexual services or commodities mediated through the internet (Jones, 2015). Besides facilitating in-person encounters, sex workers' use of digital technologies has led to the creation of exclusively digital sexual services, such as adult webcam modelling and adult content creation (Cunningham et al., 2018; Sanders et al., 2017). Before exploring the distinctive features of 'camming' (Jones, 2020) and explicit content creation on digital patronage platforms (Bonifacio & Wohn, 2020), it is important to consider how the use of digital technologies has impacted the realm of sex work more broadly.

Sex work across digital landscapes

The Beyond the Gaze (BtG) research project (Cunningham et al., 2018; Sanders et al., 2017) has provided a vital contribution to understanding the diverse nature of digital sex work, as evidenced by the rapid growth of online spaces devoted to commercial sex. While the BtG study was UK-based, its insights have broader applicability. The authors' typology exposes how the internet has become an indispensable tool for sex workers, whether they engage with clients online or in person (Cunningham et al., 2018). The project identifies twelve distinct types of digital environments used for sexual commerce. New advertising spaces, including classified websites, dating platforms, and to a lesser extent, social media, play a significant role in enabling sex workers to connect with a larger pool of clients while also specializing their audiences. Speciality websites have enabled sex workers to appeal to particular audiences interested in their physical characteristics or areas of expertise. Thus, online self-promotion can benefit sex workers by increasing their clientele and allowing them to engage solely with segments of the sex industry that appeal to them. Interactive forums for customer reviews and peer support have emerged, fostering new forms of solidarity and camaraderie (Cunningham et al., 2018; Sanders et al., 2017; Bernstein, 2007).

Jones (2015) suggests that the transformation of sexual labor lies not in the nature of services provided but in the methods of performing and monetizing them. Many sex workers who used to provide in-person services have migrated online to increase their earnings, reduce the risk of physical harm, and mitigate job losses during the COVID-19 pandemic. For newcomers, the potential for high income and low risk is a significant incentive to enter the online sex industry while pursuing higher education or other occupations (Cunningham et al., 2017). As Brents and Sanders (2010) note, the sex industry has undergone economic and social mainstreaming, resulting in a multi-layered and stratified market with changing demographics for both sex workers and clients. Research suggests that digital sex work tends to attract workers from more privileged backgrounds due to the requirements and barriers to entry involved in the work. According to several studies (Bernstein, 2007; Bimbi, 2007; Walby, 2012), workers in the digital sex industry tend to display higher levels of educational capital, access to fast internet connections, and streaming devices, and the ability to fulfil the elaborate verification policies that are typical of digital environments for sex work. For instance, creating an account usually requires submitting a copy of one's ID, a face picture, and proof of documented residency. As a result, migrant workers may face significant entry barriers that limit their participation in the industry, which contrasts with mainstream representations of digital sex work as an easy-access and low-barrier field. This challenges the notion that sex work is primarily a survival strategy, at least in its digital segments (Sanders et al., 2018). Yet, Recio's (2021, 2022)'s extensive fieldwork on the practice of sugar dating have shown that even sex workers from privileged socioeconomic backgrounds are essentially motivated by economic imperatives. Sugar dating can be described as a transactional intimate relationship which typically involves an aged wealthy man and a younger economically disadvantaged woman, defined in the jargon respectively as a sugar daddy and sugar baby (Recio, 2022). The two parties usually connect with one another through the use of popular apps such as Seeking.com, Sugardaddy.com, and so on. Qualitative research on the motivations of sugar babies in the UK has identified the neo-liberalization of British higher education institutions, characterized by increased tuition fees and reduced maintenance grants, as a key causal factor (Recio, 2021).

A significant aspect of the stratification of the digital sex industry is the establishment of work ethos centred around ideals of fun, pleasure, and freedom, contributing to a reshaping of purchased intimacy. Sex workers' subjective narratives increasingly reflect an appreciation for sexual fluidity, experimentation, and freedom (Bernstein, 2007; Sanders et al., 2017). With the intermediation of digital technologies, paid sexual encounters have shifted from the provision of delimited bodily

services to a diffuse combination of activities where sexual intercourse occurs in tandem with emotionally engaged conversations and a wider range of intimate contacts. This contributes to the construction of a “bounded authenticity as a particularly desirable and sought-after sexual commodity” (Bernstein, 2007: 474). The concept emphasizes the establishment of profound and intimate forms of erotic connection between workers and clients that are experienced as authentic yet bounded, where the economic nature of the relationship constitutes an important emotional boundary for both parties. The performance of authenticity is at the core of the sexual services and commodities provided by digital sex workers (Nayar, 2016; Berg, 2021). Alike the case of online pornography, the emphasis on authenticity is linked the centrality of amateurism in the field. The professionalization of amateurism is one of the core elements of the digital sex industry, pushing commentators to reconsider historical distinctions made between professional and amateur production, sites of labor and leisure, and circuits for media production and consumption (Nayar, 2010).

Another outcome of the digitalization of sexual commerce is the rise of individualized erotic labor, which refers to the increasing likelihood of sex work being performed, managed, and marketed in isolation (Jones, 2015: 563). Scholars have interpreted this phenomenon as possibly leading to a decrease in solidarity among sex workers and exacerbating competition, as workers can view and critically assess each other's digital profiles (McLean, 2012). Another issue of interest to scholars studying commercial sex is how the shift to online sex work has impacted worker safety. Although working online does prevent physical harm, online sex workers may still experience harm facilitated by digital means. The most common forms of harm are harassment and stalking through email, text messages, or social media (Campbell et al., 2019) and doxing. Many digital sex workers who experience harassment do not report it to the police due to the fear of stigma and further harassment, instead preferring to adopt a range of informal strategies to keep themselves safe. The concept of blended safety repertoires refers to the set of creative safety measures that have become a professional standard for most digital sex workers (Campbell et al., 2019). To sum up, the shift towards online sex work has been viewed through a lens of both positive and negative aspects in the existing literature. On the one hand, this shift has provided greater autonomy to workers, allowing for more flexibility in terms of when and where they work and increased earning potential, albeit with a level of unpredictability, as well as a perceived sense of safety (Sanders et al., 2018). On the other hand, it has also resulted in persistent stigmatization, isolation of workers, and specific risks regarding privacy. With the general characteristics of digitally mediated sex work now outlined, the discussion will now

focus on two specific forms of platform-based sex work: adult webcam modelling, also known as camming, and adult content creation on digital patronage platforms.

Despite the increasingly digital nature of sugar dating, it is not classified as a form of platform-based sex work due to several reasons. Firstly, services are typically provided in person, despite being facilitated by digital means. Additionally, platform companies do not extract earnings from sugar babies. While sugar dating apps present themselves as dating apps and forbid paid dates, users often have an implicit understanding that some form of compensation will occur, resulting in a blurred line between heterosexual dating and sex work that poses particular challenges in terms of consent. Interestingly, the platforms' revenue is derived only from premium accounts and not from the earnings of sugar babies. Therefore, the presence of sugar babies' profiles creates value for the platform in a way that resembles the marketing strategies of nightclubs and other entertainment services. This differs from adult webcam modelling and explicit content creation, which are considered forms of platform-based sex work due to their distinct business models and organizational features that directly extract revenues from workers' earnings and significantly shape their working experiences.

Sex work in the gig economy: webcam platforms and OnlyFans

The work of adult webcam modelling

Webcam platforms are interfaces designed to perform erotic shows which are simultaneously streamed to the client's device at a certain price. The business model is organized through a per-minute rate and the demand for tips in relation to certain activities of the model's show (Sanders et al, 2017). Most webcam platforms present a 'freemium' configuration where workers are compelled to initially stream for free to attract viewers and then persuade them to send tips or move to a 'private' paid chatroom (Jones, 2020). The positioning of webcammers on platforms' home page – called 'board placement' in the jargon (Van Doorn & Velthuis, 2018) depends on ranking based on their earnings, time spent online and other criteria that are usually not clear to workers. The board placement, in turn, determines the cam worker's visibility thus earning potential, while the inability to obtain visibility on the platform is likely to prematurely end the worker's career. This aspect makes adult webcam modelling a highly competitive market. Tech-savvy webcam models may exploit the platform's algorithmic configuration by purchasing bots to achieve high rankings which enable them to maximise their earning potential (Van Doorn & Velthuis, 2018). This approach, however, is strongly condemned by the moral economy of webcammers, centred around meritocratic ideals.

Another strategy to achieve visibility is the performance of sexually explicit and extreme acts in public chatrooms. This strategy, yet, is criticized by the streamers' community as lacking professionalism (because clients may expect similar kinds of performances from other models) and self-appreciation from the worker's side. Personal qualities such as creativity, affability, and loquaciousness are generally stressed by workers as the most relevant to succeed in this context. This affective work makes this activity particularly labor-intensive, given the multiple interactive shows usually performed daily (Van Doorn & Velthuis, 2018; Nayar, 2017).

Scholars have analyzed the 'hustle' of webcammers as a twofold process, involving objectification and singularisation. Objectification refers to the transformation of sexual acts into recognisable commodities within tip menus, while singularization involves the shaping of these acts into quantifiable and thus marketable offerings, transforming performances into recognisable yet distinct products suitable for economic transactions (Van Doorn & Velthuis, 2018). Similar to porn sites, webcam platforms hyper-categorise available shows based on performers' gender, age, ethnicity and physical characteristics (Saunders, 2020; Stegeman, 2021; Stegeman et al., 2023). The concept of 'categorisation regimes' (Stegeman et al., 2023) has recently been proposed to describe how the categorisation systems of webcam platforms, which organise live shows according to highly detailed but essentially imprecise labels, shape models' working conditions by determining visibility and, hence earning opportunities.

While most scholarship identifies webcam work with the precariousness that characterises low-wage gig work, Jones's (2015, 2020) comprehensive research on the adult webcamming industry challenges such representations by proposing a rather empowering view of 'camming' as often genuinely satisfying for the workers themselves, at both material and affective levels. On the one hand, it provides opportunities for socio-economic groups who often struggle to successfully navigate the labor market, such as transgender people, queer people and members of ethnic minorities. On the other hand, the flexibility and autonomy afforded to workers in organising their working time allows them to reconcile work with personal and family responsibilities. In addition, Jones' (2016) has contested the idea that emotional labor is taking place. Because of the lack of physical contact enabled by online technology and the perception of safety which it entails, she claims that mutual pleasure can actually take place in camming, as the workers interviewed emphasise sexual agency and 'authentic' pleasure. The emphasis on pleasure and the possibility of sexual experimentation rejects victimizing representation of sex work and challenges conventional views which see money as

intrinsically alienating social relationships. Zelizer's (2005) reflections on the social meaning of money have demonstrated that money and intimacy can, and do often, coexist.

The digital patronage platform OnlyFans

OnlyFans, a platform launched in 2016 for the production and distribution of creative content, operates on a subscription-based model similar to that of Youtube, Patreon, Twitch, and Facebook. Scholars have theorized it as a digital patronage platform, where performers create their own visual content and the platform provides the technological and financial means to sell it (Bonifacio & Wohn, 2020). Digital patronage refers to the act of financially supporting a content creator as a way to show appreciation for their creative work. These emerging sociotechnical systems are distinguished from advertisement-driven business models by their emphasis on financial exchange to support creative expression. The support can be provided on a regular or sporadic basis, depending on the business model and the preferences of individual content creators (Bonifacio & Wohn, 2020: 221).

On OnlyFans, users (called fans in the platforms' jargon) can access various kinds of exclusive content (mostly pictures and video) by paying a monthly fee to subscribe to creators' profiles. Unlike webcam platforms, the broadcasting and the consumption of erotic content are not necessarily synchronous nor directed to a determined audience. However, it is a common practice to sell live interactive services, such as webcam shows or texting sessions, for higher prices. Subscribers can also send one-time payment tips to creators, either as a spontaneous expression of appreciation, in exchange for personalized content or even, if attached to a direct message, to ensure the creator receives the communication shortly. Creators may charge an extra payment to allow their users to access specific content and request for paid interactions. This function of pay-per-view is a unique affordance which distinguishes OnlyFans from the other digital patronage platforms above mentioned (Bonifacio & Wohn, 2020: 223). According to the sociology of money, every payment is a communicative act which produces and performs a transactional identity (Zelizer, 2005; Swartz, 2020). Viewed from the perspective, OnlyFans' introduction of innovative payment systems native to the platform's culture can be interpreted as producing a transactional community bound by these patronage practices (Swartz, 2020). An ideal community is also established by the platform's opaque systems of ranking, expressed in percentages (with "1%" at the top of the hierarchy) which classify creators on the basis of their earnings, number of subscribers, time spent online, and other factors that are not disclosed by the platform (Van der Nagel, 2021). OnlyFans' ranking system produces a

hierarchy which shapes their relationships among creators, as any form of collaboration is usually arranged according to the positioning of the two parties in the ranking.

Another peculiarity of the platform lies in the liberal Terms of Service which allow for explicit material, which has made it a privileged site for amateur porn production. Despite its association with the adult entertainment industry, the celebrity hype around the platform has made the use of OnlyFans relatively mainstream and somewhat normalized in Western' collective imaginaries (Hamilton et al., 2022: 2). In comparison with other websites for adult entertainment, OnlyFans seems to be particularly popular with users for the involvement of non-professional porn workers, the possibility to interact with creators and buy customized content. Van der Nagel (2021) has explored the conflicting narratives of the platform (from OnlyFans' blog posts) and tweets, internet audiences (through memes), and traditional media (newspaper articles) concerning content creation on OnlyFans. While the association between OnlyFans and pornography is somewhat taken for granted in the imaginaries of journalists and internet users, the platform's corporate communication strategically downplays that association by presenting itself as a respectable social media platform targeting influencers. Remarkably, the platforms' Terms of Service allow nudity by omission. There is no explicit reference that explicit content creation is sanctioned; it is simply not listed among inappropriate behaviour. The promotional material produced by OnlyFans never mentions sex workers or porn performers as a category of users, even though they are considered to be the very actors who sustain its revenues. This attitude toward sexuality and sexual labor reflects a broader trend, also observed in the case of Tumblr and Tiktok, of platform companies strategically allowing explicit content "while growing their user base, only to deplatform this kind of content later". (Van Der Nagel, 2021: 397). Not incidentally, in August 2021 OnlyFans had announced the intention to ban sexually explicit content from the platform but then withdrew the declaration in reaction to the wave of criticism from digital activists and the broader public. Despite the wave of criticism caused by the event, OnlyFans remains nowadays the most popular subscription platform for adult entertainment.

In addition, the way in which the work on OnlyFans is subjectively experienced and narrated by the creators has helped to challenge conventional assumptions about sexual commerce. Cardoso and Scarcelli have explored the dimension of corporeality in the subjective experience of creating sexual content. Their findings suggest that the frame of objectification is insufficient to capture the self-reflexivity and self-transformative potential of creators at the core of their creative practices. Their

respondents, for instance, recalled an increase in self-esteem resulting from content production. The image of ‘digitalized bodies’ reflects the role of technology in intermediating subjects’ relations with their own bodies (Cardoso & Scarcelli, 2021). In addition, Jarrett has proposed the concept of ‘assetization’ to frame the work of OnlyFans’ creators, seeking to overcome the dominant perspective of commodification, and hence alienation, of labor-power, commonly applied both to commercial sex and to gig work. Rejecting an interpretation of commercialization as inherently linked to alienation and dispossession, and rather emphasising the agential dimension of sexual content creation, she considers working on OnlyFans as a “canny and knowing mobilisations of assets by savvy workers who retain important forms of inalienable agency within capitalist process” (Jarrett, 2022: 12).

Having discussed the existing literature on OnlyFans, it is important to consider the benefits and challenges that its organisational features pose for creators. While the draw for customers lies in the sense of disintermediation of amateur content production and the cultivation of an idealized intimacy that informs the relationships between online sex workers and their ‘fans’, creators are appealed by the role of subscription fee in filtering the access to content and interactions, unlike webcam platforms which present themselves as free entertainment venues, where the audience is encouraged to ‘tip’ performers but not required to do so. However, while on webcam platforms the various shows are displayed on the dashboard determined by the algorithmic ranking (Van Doorn & Velthuis, 2018), OnlyFans’ design does not allow browsing the profiles via its search tool: the only way to access an individual profile is by pasting the direct link to the account of interest into the browser’s search engine. Therefore, creators need to exploit a broader social media ecosystem to build and maintain a loyal fanbase. In doing so, they actively engage in self-branding practices (Hearn, 2010). This is why the labor of content creators is inherently relational and aspirational (Baym, 2015; Duffy, 2017). OnlyFans creators, indeed, may refrain from synchronous interactions with fans within the platform but have to constantly foster audience relationships in order to monetize their profiles. In this context, self-branding takes place through the uncompensated production and distribution of (mainly visual) content on social media, in order to attract followers and turn them into paid subscribers.

Although it launched only a few years ago, OnlyFans is becoming an increasingly saturated and competitive environment, also due to the platform’s considerable growth during the covid-19 pandemic. Thereby, apart from mainstream celebrities and professional porn workers who can easily monetize their pre-existing popularity, most creators must never stop the labor of social media promotion, hoping that it will prevent ‘fans’ to direct their financial flows to other creators. In

promoting themselves across different social media platforms, creators adapt their self-presentations according to the perceived environment of each individual platform, in terms of audiences and affordances, as well as their own sense of self (van Dijck, 2013; Scolere et al., 2018). This practice has been described as platform-specific self-branding, highlighting how platform-specific assumptions about the audience shape strategies of self-presentation that are distinctive to particular platforms (Scolere et al., 2018: 6). In comparison with social media influencers, their aspirational labor is particularly precarious due to the impact of social media content moderation policies, which systematically stigmatize sexuality as inherently dangerous (Paasonen et al., 2019; Tiidenberg & Van Der Nagel, 2020).

OnlyFans can be considered as exemplary of the platformization of sex labor given the creators' dependency on the social media ecology. Through their constant involvement in unpaid promotional activities aimed at attracting paying subscribers, OnlyFans creators can be classified as both platform workers and digital laborers, in accordance with the original meaning of the term (Terranova, 2000). A portion of their earnings is extracted by OnlyFans, while their social media production simultaneously generates value for social media companies. This intersection of digital sex work and social media content creation establishes a meaningful connection between the heretofore disparate scholarly traditions associated with these topics. Consequently, it is worth to provide an overview of the literature on social media influencing and content creation to contextualize this novel form of digital labor, which shares many elements of social media work as described by the literature, yet with some distinctive features that encourage for further exploration.

Content creator cultures

Content creator cultures have become a focal point in the digital media landscape, with a growing body of research exploring the increasing professionalization of content creation in the platform economy. Social media content creation is a form of creative labor that involves the commercialization and professionalization of native social media users who produce and distribute original content to develop, promote, and monetize their personal media brands (Cunningham & Craig, 2019). The concept of self-branding, understood as a “form of affective, immaterial labor purposefully undertaken by individuals in order to garner attention, reputation, and, potentially, profit” (Hearn, 2010: 427), is central to understanding this emerging digital practice that marks the shift from leisure user-generated content to a goal-oriented performativity. As discussed in the previous section on

platformized cultural labor, self-branding is becoming increasingly prominent in many spheres of cultural production. A key aspect is that in the context of professionalized social media promotion, the brand itself is the asset.

Examining the influence of broader shifts in digital environments on creators' activities and narratives, recent research has explored the transition from the use of blogs to Instagram. This investigation underscores the necessity for creators to demonstrate flexibility in adapting their self-presentations to the specific affordances of the chosen platform (Arriagada & Ibáñez, 2020). While the primary focus of this study was intended to encompass creators' adaptations across various platforms, it primarily delves into the transition from blogs—albeit somewhat vaguely conceived as a singular, unified context—to Instagram. Notably, this study does not extend its scope to consider adaptations within other platform environments.

Van Driel and Dumitrica (2021) also delved into the professionalization of Instagram influencers, illuminating the evolving relationship between influencers, their audience, and advertisers. Their study explores how influencers navigate the conflicting perceived expectations of their audiences and advertisers, within the context of unpredictable changes in platforms' affordances. They define creators' self-professionalization as emerging at the intersection of three dynamics: advertisers' demands, creators' own understanding of their relationships with audiences and advertisers, and the platform's specific ethos with regards to different user categories. Self-professionalization is thus established as the process through which influencers internalize the market logic in the production of their own cultural content, aligning themselves with and becoming integrated into existing marketing and advertising industries. While this study makes valuable contributions to understanding professionalization in social media content production, its focus on a limited sample (11) of creators from a single platform limits its generalizability to the broader social media ecology (Poell et al., 2021) where professionalized content creators are embedded. This tendency is rather common in the research stream on content creators, with studies primarily concerned with content creation practices on single, particular platforms such as Twitch (Mallari, Williams & Hsieh, 2021), YouTube (Ma & Kou, 2021, 2022), and Instagram (Van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021). These studies identify platform-specific creative practices as well as unique creator-platform interaction patterns. Research has also explored the emergence of new internet celebrity cultures on specific social media landscapes. Abidin (2021) explores the attention economies and visibility labor practices within TikTok, focusing on how creators strategically use the platform's features to gain visibility and grow their following.

Shifting from a single platform focus to an exploration of creators' activities across a wider ecosystem of interconnected platforms (Poell et al., 2021), Scolere, Pruchniewska, and Duffy (2018) conducted in-depth interviews with content creators active on multiple platforms to assess whether and to what extent their promotional strategies vary across different social networking sites. They found that creators adapt their self-presentations to the specific environment of each platform, considering the target audience, platform affordances, and their own sense of self (van Dijck, 2013; Scolere et al., 2018). They propose the concept of platform-specific self-branding to emphasize how platform-specific assumptions about the audience shape self-presentation strategies tailored to particular platform environments (Scolere et al., 2018: 6). Ma, Gui, and Kou (2023) also shed light on multi-platform content creation, delving into how creators navigate the landscape of multiple platforms through a strategic approach involving platform prioritization, content synchronization, and audience management. They explore the professionalization of content creation by highlighting the inherent uncertainties that creators face and their efforts to mitigate the impact of platform algorithms on their visibility.

Existing research has highlighted the precarity of creative labor on social media, stemming from the need for creators to adapt to abrupt changes in platforms' governance and technological infrastructures (Duffy et al., 2021). Duffy and Meisner (2023) examine the impact of platform governance on social media creators, underscoring the implications of algorithmic (in)visibility on creators' practices, including self-censorship and efforts to circumvent algorithmic intervention. Similarly, Petre and colleagues (2019) discuss platform paternalism and the politics of algorithmic visibility, emphasizing the demand for non-instrumental approaches to cultural production from content creators. These studies illuminate the complex dynamics between creators and platform algorithms, profoundly shaping their visibility and practices. Given the crucial role of algorithms in determining what content is presented to users and which category of content creators gains popularity, creators' efforts to navigate such algorithmic regimes of visibility have been aptly described as a 'visibility game' (Cotter, 2018). OnlyFans workers differ from mainstream content creators in one crucial aspect: they cater to adult audiences, and they typically do not gain revenues from sponsoring brands (albeit there are some exceptions of collaboration with producers of sex toys) but through user subscriptions to their OnlyFans profiles. This distinction has significant implications for their visibility tactics and the challenges they face in promoting their content. On the one hand, OnlyFans workers must tailor their social media strategies to turn their following into paid subscribers in a competitive and saturated market. On the other hand, they must navigate the delicate

balance between promoting their content and adhering to content moderation policies that systematically stigmatize sexuality (Paasonen et al., 2019; Tiidenberg & Van Der Nagel, 2020). This tension makes their visibility game particularly challenging. As platform workers and digital laborers, OnlyFans workers face an increased risk of being deplatformed by both OnlyFans and social media companies, a consequence of the inconsistent approach that platforms adopt towards sexuality. This issue will be explored in more detail in the next and final paragraph.

Sexual labor within hostile media ecosystems: content moderation and the deplatformization of sexuality

Sexuality is considered an essential part of social media entertainment (Cunningham & Craig, 2019; Tiidenberg & Van der Nagel, 2020; Paasonen et al., 2019; Van der Nagel, 2021). The popular hashtag #NSFW (not safe for work) is used to classify sexually suggestive content on social media. The reference to work suggests that #NSFW content is not considered suitable for viewing at work, because that will have a detrimental impact on the viewer's reputation. #NSFW content is not characterized by specific representational properties but by the conflation of nudity with risk. The element of 'safety' in the hashtag, in fact, reflects an unspecified sense of risk associated with sexuality which is characterized social media environments (Paasonen et al., 2019). Such a vague association of risk makes the hashtag generate instant attention value. The idea is that if the content is not suitable for viewing at work, it will be accessed later on, therefore it also functions as an engagement device involving affective dynamics of risk and attraction (Paasonen et al., 2019; Tiidenberg & Der Nagel, 2020).

Despite its centrality in social media landscapes, #NSFW content is systematically stigmatized and excluded from mainstream platforms. Tiidenberg and Van Der Nagel (2020) have interpreted this seeming contradiction by theorizing a 'trifecta of anxieties', namely the combination of moral panics concerning sex, the internet and public life which exacerbate one another. This concept reflects the complex interplay between anxieties related to the public nature of sexual content, the intersection of sexuality and digital spaces, and the broader societal concerns surrounding the portrayal of sexuality in online environments. A questionable aspect of content moderation is its almost exclusive focus on nudity and sexuality while overlooking content displaying violence (Are & Gerrard, 2023).

Yet, the approach of contemporary social media to sexuality cannot be understood without considering the impact of FOSTA-SESTA bills. In 2018 the bills “Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act” (FOSTA) and “Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act” (SESTA) deeply changed digital environments in the United States and elsewhere. The bills establish themselves as exceptions to Section 230 of the United States Communication Decency Act that has kept online services immune from civil liability for the content their users post. Following FOSTA-SESTA bill, social media platforms have toughened their respective community standards and terms of use to prevent liability for facilitating sex traffic, by embracing precautionary attitudes toward sexual content moderation that are based on decontextualized notions of sexuality (Spišák et al., 2021: 2). Current social media moderation policies on nudity and sexuality directly limit sex workers’ ability to promote themselves and engage with peer communities (Tiidenberg & Van der Nagel, 2020; Paasonen et al., 2019).

The platforms systematically apply double standards according to which distinct categories of users end up being moderated differently: whereas powerful actors such as film celebrities are allowed to a greater display of nudity, sex workers are exposed to content removal or even profile suspension without even violating platforms’ regulations (Are & Paasonen, 2021). Being identified with the adult industry can be a sufficient condition for deplatformization, thereby online sex workers are pushed to develop creative ways to negotiate the hostile media ecosystem upon which they are inevitably dependent. Therefore, it would be difficult to frame platformized sex work without understanding how adult content creators navigate platforms’ affordances and content moderation policies. Often being presented in vague and de-contextualized manners by each platforms’ Terms of Services, content moderation policies tend to remain obscure to users’ understandings, which build their own subjective interpretation on what is allowed and forbidden and develop creative strategies to circumvent these norms.

Albeit sex workers are a primary target of content moderation, it has also been highlighted the disproportionate targeting of women, queer, and coloured-skin users in content moderation systems (Duffy & Meisner, 2022). Therefore, besides the impact on sex workers, the wave of the moral panic surrounding sexual content on social media has been criticized as having a detrimental impact on safety, freedom of expression and the assertion of sexual rights as fundamental human rights, which damages Internet users as a whole (Tiidenberg & van der Nagel 2020; Paasonen et al., 2019; Spisak et al., 2021).

Conclusions

This literature review has explored the platformization of the porn and sex industry to contextualize the emerging kind of digital labor of adult content creation within the platform OnlyFans, that eludes existing conceptualizations in the sociological literature. It has illustrated how digital platforms for adult entertainment have transformed sexual commerce, challenging established notions of both sex work and platform labor. Drawing on research on digital and platform work, as well as studies on online pornography and sex work, the discussion has examined the evolving relationship between labor and technology, focusing on the gradual shifts brought about by technological advancements in both the broad organization of work and, specifically, in the sex industry.

After a broad overview of the framework of platformization (Poell et al., 2021) the review delved into the profound transformations induced by the integration of digital technologies into work processes. The emergence of platform labor was framed as the ultimate outcome of this technological integration. To trace this process of technological integration and its impact on the work experience, the discussion has examined the multifaceted effects of digital technologies. A key theme explored is the phenomenon of "presence bleed of digitally mediated work" (Gregg, 2011), which refers to the blurring of boundaries between work and private life due to the pervasiveness of online connectivity. The ubiquitous nature of online technologies has enabled organizations to extend the work process beyond traditional workspaces and hours, effectively extracting additional symbolic labor from employees, blurring the distinction between work and private life. This blurring of boundaries has contributed to an increasing individualization of labor, as employees bear the responsibility of managing their work-life balance amidst the constant demands of digital connectivity (Gregg, 2011; Ticona; 2022).

The dependency on digital devices for work has been interpreted as leading to a widespread and multifaceted form of precarity, affecting both upper-class and lower-income workers (Ticona, 2022). This trend has been accompanied by an increasing emphasis on self-entrepreneurial ethos, particularly in the creative industries (Baym, 2016; Duffy, 2017), but now also extending to the gig economy, where low-wage service workers are increasingly compelled to employ self-branding strategies (Hearn, 2010) to market themselves on work platforms (Fetterolf, 2022; Ticona & Mateescu, 2018). These developments gave new emphasis to the concept of emotional labor

(Hochschild, 1983) in a digitalized post-industrial capitalist context, where the commodification of intimacy is seen to deeply permeate work in the digital economy, albeit with a gendered dimension. Men are predominantly engaged in informational labor, while women are more likely to be involved in affective labor (Duffy, 2017), reflecting the broader feminization of work (Jarrett, 2016) in contemporary capitalism.

The discussion highlighted the critical distinction between digitalization and platformization, emphasizing the gradual and complex process by which platforms have become integrated into various spheres of work and everyday life. In a broader sense, digitalization refers to the increasing application of digital technologies in work activities, encompassing the issues mentioned above but not limited to them. In contrast, platformization specifically denotes new forms of work that are mediated through the socio-technical infrastructures of digital platforms, generating revenues for platform owners (Van Doorn, 2017; Gandini, 2019). Within this context, clarifying the distinction between digital labor and platform labor, often conflated as interchangeable concepts, seemed crucial. As it was previously explained, digital labor refers to the appropriation of unpaid leisure activities of online users by social media companies, effectively constituting work and subject to exploitation, drawing upon Marxist theory of value (Terranova, 2000; Gandini, 2021). This concept is closely intertwined with the notion of immaterial labor (Lazzarato, 1996), encompassing non-physical value production centred around knowledge, affect, emotion, or relationships. While acknowledging valid criticisms that the concept of digital labor has been applied to a broad spectrum of labor and technology relationships with distinct characteristics (Gandini, 2021), the discussion shifted to platform labor, being the context of this research case study.

As mentioned above, platform labor exists on a continuum of various forms of employment relationships facilitated by digital platforms. Platforms often function as market intermediaries and shadow employers, simultaneously denying their role as employers by classifying workers as independent contractors. This opaque and ambiguous relationship benefits platforms by enabling them to evade legal responsibility for the precarious working conditions they foster (Van Doorn, 2017; Gandini, 2019). The literature on platform labor stresses the unique challenges faced by these workers, including the need for constant adaptation to frequent changes in platforms' infrastructure and governance. This adaptability often leads to precarity, individualization of responsibility and risks, and systematic inequalities across gender, age, ethnicity, and ability (Poell et al., 2021). Beyond low-wage gig work, the literature has also examined the reconfiguration of creative labor brought

about by digital platforms. Concepts such as relational labor (Baym, 2016) and aspirational labor (Duffy, 2017) have been introduced to capture the imperative of self-branding (Hearn, 2010) as a necessary, yet not sufficient condition, for success in a saturated and competitive market in the media industries.

Having examined the multi-dimensional impact of digital technologies on the work experience, particularly in relation to platform labor, the discussion subsequently turned to the specific context of online pornography and sex work. This sector has been at the forefront of digitalization and platformization, and its transformation raises unique challenges and opportunities for understanding the changing nature of work in the digital age. The preceding exploration of the impact of digital technologies on work has highlighted the emergence of new forms of labor and the blurring of boundaries between work and private life. These trends are particularly evident in the realm of online pornography and sex work, where digital platforms have produced a new configurations of work relationships that defy existing categorizations.

It has been illustrated that the pervasiveness of digital platforms in commercial sex has facilitated the entry of a diverse range of workers and blurred the boundaries between work and leisure, as well as professional and amateur working conditions (Nayar, 2010; Paasonen, 2019). In the sex industry, the initial shift towards digitalization has been viewed as a form of disintermediation between performers and audiences. The availability of online spaces for advertising sexual services has provided workers with the opportunity to connect with a broader audience and screen their clientele, thereby fostering safer working conditions (Cunningham et al., 2018; Sanders et al., 2017). The emergence of sexual services exclusively conducted online, such as webcam modelling, has detached the experience of sex work from direct bodily contact, enhancing safety not only in terms of physical harm but also overall enjoyment (Jones, 2020). The reduced emphasis on strictly sexual performance in favour of an allegedly authentic intimate engagement has placed workers' subjectivities at the core of the performance of digital sex work (Nayar, 2010; Berg, 2021). The allure of potential high earnings within a context of perceived safety and well-being has led to the mainstreaming of the digital sex industry, attracting workers from diverse socio-economic backgrounds (Berg, 2021). Consequently, there has been a stratification within the sex workforce, accompanied by a process of professionalization of amateurism (Nayar, 2010), resulting in the establishment of a work ethos articulated in terms of passion and spontaneous pleasure (Bernstein, 2007).

As the role of digital platforms in providing sexual services was initially perceived as a factor that disintermediated the relationships between sex workers and their audience, viewing this process through the lens of platformization (Poell et al., 2021) allows us to understand that conducting sex work through digital platforms actually represents a reintermediation of working relationships. This shift is linked to a reconfiguration of labor shaped by the ever-changing infrastructural and governmental features of these platforms.

The visibility and earning potential of digital sex workers depend on the socio-technical structures of the platforms they use. These platforms, often opaque and subject to frequent changes, compel workers to continually develop creative strategies to navigate the algorithmic regimes of visibility. In webcam platforms, algorithmic sorting is pivotal in determining the order and presentation of workers' profiles to potential clients (Van Doorn & Velthuis, 2018), leading to dynamics of hyper-categorization and hyper-sexualization (Stegeman et al., 2023). In contrast, the digital patronage platform (Bonifacio & Wohn, 2020) OnlyFans operates with a model where access to creators' profiles is exclusive to direct links. As a result, whereas webcam models cultivate visibility within the platforms they use, OnlyFans creators must actively promote themselves on social media.

This reliance on a broad ecosystem of interconnected platforms underscores the infrastructural dependency inherent in the process of platformization (Poell et al., 2021). An additional significant implication of the need for social media self-branding is that it categorizes adult content creators as both platform workers (Van Doorn, 2017; Gandini, 2019), engaging in a financial relationship with OnlyFans, and digital laborers (Terranova, 2000) involved in the unpaid production of content that generates revenues for social media companies. Furthermore, OnlyFans adult content creators can be considered both sex workers, due to the explicit nature of their content, and content creators in the original definition of the concept. Therefore, the discussion included a concise overview of the scholarly literature on content creators, which underlines the precarity resulting from the need of constant adaptation to opaque changes in platforms' socio-technical structures and governance. However, the existing literature on content creators has yet to address the peculiar challenges faced by category of adult content creators. While current research on OnlyFans work (Cardoso & Scarcelli, 2021; Jarrett, 2022) mainly frames it in the context of sex work and pornography, it overlooks the fact that, besides interactions with clients (often even outsourced to dedicated agencies), content creation is at the core of the labor process. As a matter of fact, both explicit and non-explicit content creators invest significant efforts in the production of digital content. In terms of lived work experience, yet a

crucial difference lies in the relationship with social media content moderation, which systematically targets sexual content. This introduces specific challenges to OnlyFans content creators who are unavoidably dependent on social media to gain subscribers, as determined by the very design of the digital patronage platform (Bonifacio & Wohn, 2020) they utilize. The final section of the literature review has emphasized the impact of social media content moderation policies. With a disproportionate focus on nudity and sexuality compared to other controversial content (Are & Gerrard, 2023), and the adoption of double standards that disadvantage sex workers in contrast to celebrities and influencers (Are & Paasonen, 2021), social media governance severely constrains sex workers' ability for self-promotion (Tiidenberg & Van der Nagel, 2020; Paasonen et al., 2019).

To sum up, the platformization of the sex industry, particularly with the rise of digital patronage platforms (Bonifacio & Wohn, 2020), has thus given rise to a new form of digital labor that combines the entrepreneurial ethos inherent in high-skill creative work with the precarity commonly associated with gig work. This challenges existing definitions of platform labor and underscores the dynamic evolution of work within digital platforms. Moreover, the diminishing importance of solely sexual performance, in favour of various types of non-sexual intimate interactions, as expected by the audience, and the growing importance of self-branding in the digital sex work industry, may signify a change in the fundamental nature of sexual labor. Adult content creators now allocate a substantial portion of their time and resources to navigate the content moderation regimes imposed by the array of social media platforms they rely on. They strategically develop creative approaches to prevent the algorithmic threats of invisibility (Bucher, 2012) employing a combination of explicit and non-explicit elements in their digital self-presentation. The contribution proposed by the present literature review posits that this transformation is giving rise to a mainstreaming of sex work, a phenomenon yet to be thoroughly conceptualized in the existing literature.

Moreover, albeit the literature on digital sex work has recognized a process of workforce stratification (Bernstein, 2007), there is an opportunity to delve deeper into the intricate processes of channelization and standardization that the labor force undergoes due to the specific design and audiences of adult entertainment platforms. As pointed out in the introduction, the allure of a career on OnlyFans attracts a heterogeneous range of individuals, including both professional sex workers and newcomers, engaging with content creation for diverse purposes. Thereby, the workforce encompasses those who consider it their primary source of income, individuals who view it as a passive income entry (e.g., mainstream celebrities), and those who use it as a supplementary income

alongside revenues from other areas of digital labor (e.g., social media influencers), other realms of sex work (e.g., escorting, stripping, sugar dating, etc.), or traditional employment. Remarkably, the platform also appeals to amateurs seeking digital intimacies for genuinely playful purposes.

However, the need to navigate the complex regimes of visibility (involving both affordances and perceived audience expectations) imposed by the interrelated ecology of platforms creators are inevitably dependent on, causes creators to standardize their content to align with the presumed market's demands. In the process, the diverse categories of creators mutually influence each other: on the one hand, individuals joining the platform for strictly professional purposes are pushed to embrace the playful approach that is expected to accompany social media content production; on the other hand, amateurs undergo a parallel process of professionalization which involves developing expertise in navigating content moderation to prevent the risk of deplatformization.

In conclusion, OnlyFans emerges as a compelling case study with the potential to catalyse interdisciplinary exploration at the intersections of sex work, platform labor, and social media. By bridging the gaps between scholarly disciplines and merging the divide between work platforms and entertainment platforms, adult content creation on OnlyFans introduces a distinctive form of digital labor which pushes to a systematic analysis of the nuanced intersections between sex work and the evolving landscape of social media influencing.

Chapter 2 Research methodologies

Introduction

The overarching aim of this thesis is to explore the transformative impact of digital platforms on the landscape of sexual labor, with a particular focus on the unique nature of the labor that emerges from the OnlyFans platform. This labor's liminal status, between amateur pornography and social media influencing, challenges conventional categorisations found in existing platform labor scholarship (Poell et al., 2021; van Doorn, 2017) as it combines the characteristics of 'gig work' and platformised creative work, bridging these two forms of platform-dependent labor that have until recently been treated as separate (Jarrett, 2022). The research adopts a qualitative framework to the study of digital spaces, combining immersive ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth interviews with qualitative digital methods (Caliandro & Gandini, 2016; Caliandro, 2017; Airoidi, 2018).

Ethnography is an interpretive research approach that explores the complex ways in which individuals perceive their world and derive meaning from/make sense of their subjective experiences. Ethnography, as an interpretive research framework, places its central focus on the processes of meaning-making within the context of everyday experiences. Emphasis is mainly on how the social contexts in which individuals are embedded shape their subjective understandings. Ethnographic research draws on abductive reasoning (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014) to build knowledge through a back-and-forth reflexive process between theoretical assumptions and empirical data. To do so, it avoids imposing preconceived notions on the data by prioritizing knowledge claims and contextualization that are grounded in real-world experiences. This is because knowledge is conceived as inherently contextual and embedded in social relations. Typically, the research question emerges through a dynamic interplay between existing theories and empirical observations, with the overarching objective of unveiling the implicit norms and behaviours that underpin specific social contexts or phenomena. In prioritizing knowledge claims and contextualization rooted in empirical

experience, ethnographic research approaches the traditional sociological goals of generalizability and representativeness of findings with a great deal of scepticism. Its primary aim is rather to provide rich and nuanced insights into the meaning-making processes of the individuals located within the specific context of interest, as a mean to foster critical reflection and cultivate thought-provoking questions for further research, all while embracing the inherent openness and uncertainty of scientific production as a socially constructed process. The quality standard of reliability of findings is thus replaced by that of plausibility (Cardano, 2020). The plausibility of a research argument is assessed by scrutinising the empirical conditions that led to its formulation (Cardano, 2009: 11).

This research approach typically involves long-term fieldwork, during which the ethnographer immerses themselves in the community or setting they are studying and collects data mainly through first-hand observations, meticulously transcribed into field notes, and in-depth interviews. Crucially, ethnographic research emphasizes the role of the researcher's subjective positionality in shaping their access to the field and their interpretation of the gathered data. The concept of positionality encompasses personal philosophical views and values as well as social, cultural, and economic backgrounds and any other subjective aspects like gender, age, ability, all of which collectively shape how reality is perceived (Alcoff, 1999). The researcher's own background, beliefs, and experiences are integral to the research process, and their influence is carefully considered throughout the study. However, unlike positivist frameworks, which recognize yet seek to minimize the researcher's bias, interpretive research sees the researcher's subjectivity as a conscious and valuable contribution to the understanding of the phenomenon under scrutiny. Paradigmatic self-awareness and reflexivity are, thus, established as key requirements to assess the quality of ethnographic investigation (Cardano, 2009, 2020).

The objective of ethnographic research is to produce what anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) famously termed 'thick description', which is a detailed and contextualized account of the culture or phenomenon being studied. Thick description goes beyond simply reporting on what people say and do; it also seeks to understand the implicit layers of meaning and significance that surround the phenomenon under scrutiny. Ethnographic research has historically aimed to uncover the lived experiences of marginalized groups, and to challenge dominant narratives about controversial social phenomena. This is why it is regarded as an appropriate epistemological and methodological framework for the study of a multifaceted topic phenomenon as digital sex work.

Ethnographic fieldwork has been historically centred on site-intensive participant observation. It involves the practice of collecting evidence from social actors through enduring close, in-person contact within their ordinary settings and participation in their everyday life and activities. The goal is to mitigate the inherent bias that verbal accounts, as any kind of self-reported data, present, by empirically observing how individuals' behaviors and interactions unfold with the purpose of bridging the divide between words, meanings, and action (Jerolmack & Khan, 2014). A gold standard of ethnography, as exemplified by classic anthropological monographs (Malinowski, 2014¹; Evans-Pritchard, 1937), is the requirement that researchers immerse themselves in the community they intend to study, learn to master the native language of the participants, and internalize their everyday habits, all while experiencing relative isolation from peers such as co-nationals, fellow researchers, and personal acquaintances (Malinowski, 2014).

For a significant period, ethnographic scholarship primarily regarded enduring co-residency as necessary to grasp the latent meanings of participants' accounts and behaviour. However, in the first decades of the 20th century, ethnography underwent substantial changes. While it had initially emerged as a discipline primarily focused on studying remote indigenous communities, driven by the implicit urgency of collecting data before these communities faced inevitable extinction (Boas, 1887), starting from the 1920s the field expanded its scope to include contemporary Western societies, largely influenced by the prominent sociological stream known as the Chicago school (Turner, 1988). During this phase of the discipline's evolution, ethnographers commonly directed their attention to specific subcultures within contemporary Western societies. These subcultures included street gangs (Whyte, 2012), homeless communities (Anderson, 2022), and workers engaged with commercialized nightlife (Cressey, 1932), among others. Despite the broadening scope of ethnographic inquiry, the gold standard of site-intensive research remained prominent. At the end of the twentieth century, the framework of multisited ethnography marked a departure from the traditional emphasis on enduring co-residency and single-location research, introducing a more flexible approach that allowed ethnographers to study phenomena and communities across multiple, interconnected sites. Multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995; Hannerz, 2003) is defined as «a mode of ethnographic research self-consciously embedded in the world system [...] that moves out from

¹ First edition in 1922.

the single sites and local situation of conventional ethnographic research design to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space» (Marcus, 1995: 96).

In an effort to adapt to the changing landscape of contemporary societies, ethnography has recently responded to the proliferation of digital technologies and the expansion of online communities by introducing new research paradigms. Given the pervasiveness of digital technologies in virtually all spheres of social life, the approach of virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000) draws on the premise of rejecting the dichotomy between the 'real' and 'virtual' to conceptualize digital communities and cultures as significant social worlds. It recognizes, in fact, that the internet is not a separate or detached realm but is embedded in people's everyday lives. Accordingly, this framework emphasizes the embodied experiences of individuals in digital spaces and the ways in which online interactions and practices are intertwined with offline realities (Hine, 2015). A vital contribution of virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000) is the theorization of the internet as a cultural artifact, introducing an understanding of the internet as a product of culture and a technology that is inherently shaped by social and cultural dynamics, used differently by various social groups with contextually situated goals and priorities (Perkin & Howe, 2020; Brügger et al., 2017). Considering the internet as a cultural artifact means recognizing that it is socially constructed and that it reflects and influences cultural practices, norms, and values (Brügger et al., 2017) while also paying attention to the broader social and cultural implications of its use (Hine, 2000; 2015). Virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000) primarily adopts a qualitative research approach, centred on the adaptation, or virtualization, of traditional ethnographic techniques, such as participant observation and interviews, but also involves considering the unique challenges and opportunities of studying digital spaces, such as the selective nature of online self-presentation and the challenges of interpreting online interactions. Similar approaches that align with this framework include Internet ethnography (Miller and Slater, 2001), cyber-ethnography (Escobar, 1994), digital ethnography (Murthy, 2008), expanded ethnography (Beneito-Montagut, 2011), and ethnography of virtual worlds (Boellstorff et al., 2012). While Hine (2000) situates her virtual methods framework as inspired by ethnography, it is not conceived as an ethnographic methodology in and of itself. An emerging stream of research has contributed to the systematization of digital ethnography as a reliable approach, comparable to conventional on-site fieldwork (Alinejad, 2018; Westman, 2015; Abidin & De Seta, 2020).

Digital ethnography is developed to study the behaviours, interactions, and practices of individuals and communities in digital environments such as social media platforms, online

communities, and virtual worlds (Alinejad, 2018; Westman, 2015; Ardèvol & Cruz, 2013). This research method is employed to explore the social, cultural, and political dynamics of these online spaces and to understand how they shape and are shaped by individuals and communities (Airoidi, 2018; Rosa, 2022). While it shares similar epistemological perspectives with the approaches mentioned above, digital ethnography distinguishes itself through its unique methodological approach. While virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000) involves the adaptation of traditional ethnographic participant observation to digital research rather than the creation of new 'natively digital' methodologies, one key aspect of digital ethnography is the utilization of digital technologies and tools for data collection and analysis. Conventional qualitative methods like participant observation and interviews can be complemented by content analysis and network analysis to gain deeper insights into the online culture and practices of the studied group (Alinejad, 2018; Caliandro, 2017; Nascimento et al., 2022). However, broadening the scope of ethnographic inquiries also brings increased complexity in addressing ethical and methodological concerns. Digital ethnographers must, on one hand, navigate issues such as informed consent, privacy, and the potential for harm to participants (Abidin & Seta, 2020; Czarnecka, 2022). On the other hand, they need to overcome the inherent limitations and challenges of studying digital spaces, including the transient nature of online communities and potential biases in data collection and analysis (Møller & Robards, 2019).

This research's methodology draws on the approaches of digital ethnography outlined above. The data collection involved several diverse activities, implying varying degree of subjective involvement with the field. It combined in-depth semi-structured interviews with 35 digital sex workers, interface (MacLeod & McArthur, 2019) and documentary analysis (Gorsky & Mold, 2020) of sex work platforms, fieldnotes daily gathered during the ethnographic fieldwork, and data collected from social media, both manually and through scraping techniques (Instagram, Tiktok, and Telegram). Although OnlyFans is the primary case study, adult webcam platforms and social media are other important sites of investigations. Webcam platforms are analyzed in comparison to OnlyFans to assess how different business models and organisational features of adult entertainment platforms shape the working experience of digital sex workers. Social media also constitute an indispensable context of research because of the centrality of multi-platform self-branding in the work of OnlyFans content creators.

The study is also grounded in the framework of multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995; Hannerz, 2003) in the sense that, just as content creators need to use a wider social media ecosystem

to build their fan base, a researcher needs to rely on different social media for recruitment purposes. Recruitment attempts have involved following potential participants across the various platforms they use to gain visibility, relying on a digital medium that is uniquely relevant to this user population, that of Linktrees. Linktree is a third-party platform that allows users to create a single link that contains multiple links to other websites. It is popular among adult content creators because it allows them to include a link to their adult platforms in their social media bio without violating the platforms' terms of service. In any case, within the constellation of platforms that formed the research context, fieldwork on OnlyFans involved a higher degree of participation. In particular, an immersive ethnographic fieldwork on the platform have been conducted between June 2021 to May 2023. The digital data collection, on the other hand, involved a dual approach of visual and textual analysis to contents posted by OnlyFans creators on Instagram, Tiktok, and Telegram.

However, before reviewing the general outline of the research and delving into the methodological practices I employed in the fieldwork, it is worth reflecting on the methodological relevance of OnlyFans as a case study in the ethnography of digital platforms. Previous studies have highlighted the challenges of conducting ethnographic investigation on digital platforms, proposing the evocative representation of the field as a black box (Gandini & Bonini, 2020) to stress how platforms are designed to be fundamentally opaque to researchers and to the general public. Beside owners' widespread reluctance to provide access to data, a key characteristic of platforms is that they tend to be affected by constant changes in their governmental and technological infrastructures (Poell et al., 2021). This causes not only users to be at constant risk of deplatformization (which for platform workers become a matter of survival) but also makes the research field inherently precarious. Funnily enough, in August 2021, a couple of months after the start of my fieldwork, OnlyFans announced the intention to remove explicit content from its environment, but the so called 'porn ban' was withdrawn only five days later after an intense backlash from sex work activists, academics and broader internet audiences. If the ban was becoming effective, it would have caused a whole reorganization of the research design.

To face such challenges, I adopted Gandini' and Bonini's (2020) suggestion to navigate the inaccessibility of digital platforms by embracing the principle of polymorphous engagement in the field, which involves «interacting with informants across a number of dispersed sites, not just in local communities, and sometimes in virtual form; and it mean collecting data eclectically from a disparate array of sources in many different ways» (Gusterson, 1997: 116, quoted in Gandini & Bonini, 2020:

5). In my case, this meant combining various techniques of data collection to observe how digital sex workers navigate the platforms ecosystems they are embedded in. The case of OnlyFans is particularly interesting for ethnographic research due to its peculiar characteristics. The platform design, in fact, implies that interactions are heavily datafied and monetized, which poses relevant implications for research feasibility and power relationships with participants. Moreover, it allows accessing creators' profiles only through the direct link, making a systematic sampling virtually impossible and increasing the risk of losing segments of the population. In addition, the ethical concerns of ethnographic observations are heightened by the sensitive nature of creators' data and their precarious positioning in the platform economy. The challenges experienced during the fieldwork, hence, constituted an opportunity to reflect on how a platform's design shapes access to the field, relationship with research participants and the affective experience of ethnographic fieldwork. The quest to overcome the methodological and ethical challenges inherent in platform ethnography compels the researcher to cultivate creative strategies deeply rooted in the specific research context. This requires a commitment to flexibility, adaptability, and an openness to the unforeseen, fostering an ongoing process of trial and error.

Ethical standpoint

In terms of research ethics, the research is grounded in the principles of data feminism² (D'Ignazio & Klein, 2020). While this framework emerged in the context of data science, its principles

² Articulated by the authors as following:

«*Examine power*. Data feminism begins by analysing how power operates in the world.

Challenge power. Data feminism commits to challenging unequal power structures and working toward justice.

Elevate emotion and embodiment. Data feminism teaches us to value multiple forms of knowledge, including the knowledge that comes from people as living, feeling bodies in the world.

Rethink binaries and hierarchies. Data feminism requires us to challenge the gender binary, along with other systems of counting and classification that perpetuate oppression.

Embrace pluralism. Data feminism insists that the most complete knowledge comes from synthesizing multiple perspectives, with priority given to local, Indigenous, and experiential ways of knowing.

offer valuable guidance for researchers across various epistemological standpoints. Extending beyond the authors' original focus on uncovering systems of oppression in data science, my interpretation of data feminism informed both the framing of the digital sex work topic and the choice of ethnography as a suitable methodology for this investigation.

In the authors' understanding, power is defined as "the current configuration of structural privilege and oppression" embedded in society that results in certain social groups enjoying unearned privileges while others are systematically disadvantaged (D'Ignazio & Klein, 2020: 24). Data feminism urges us to identify the forces of oppression at the root of structural inequalities and to develop an evidence-based understanding of how they operate in practice. In my research, this has been attempted by highlighting the precarity associated with infrastructural dependency and exclusion that shapes the lived experience of digital sex work. The work of adult content creators generates significant revenue for entertainment platforms. However, the frequent and opaque changes in the platforms' terms of service place this category of users at constant risk of deplatformization. After all, platforms have a long history of exploiting the initial visibility gained from sexual content, only to later discard or restrict it, which is clearly problematic for sex workers who rely on these platforms (Cotter, 2018). Indeed, previous research has long highlighted the tendency of platforms to privilege certain stakeholders over others. In particular, the interests of creators are overlooked in favour of those of advertisers and payment providers, as demonstrated by the (in)famous porn ban proposed by OnlyFans in August 2021.

Furthermore, as anticipated in the literature review chapter, OnlyFans creators can only gain visibility through self-branding on social media, yet they are systematically targeted by content moderation (Are & Paasonen, 2021). In addition, algorithmic moderation tends to disadvantage queer and coloured users, causing sex workers who are cisgender and white to be more visible. This inevitably creates a hierarchy in the landscape of digital sex work, where white cisgender women are

Consider context. Data feminism asserts that data is not neutral or objective. It is the product of unequal social relations, and this context is essential for conducting accurate, ethical analysis.

Make labour visible. The work of data science, like all work in the world, is the work of many hands. Data feminism makes this labour visible so that it can be recognised and valued. » (D'Ignazio & Klein, 2020: 17).

advantaged: their greater online visibility allows for greater monetisation than other categories of individuals. Furthermore, the requirement for fast connectivity and the range of devices necessary for successful content production can exclude economically disadvantaged social actors. Similarly, the requirement for identity verification (and sometimes even proof of residence) on adult entertainment platforms directly excludes undocumented migrants. Showing these dynamics through ethnographic evidence aims to unpack the system of power that is intertwined with platformization.

Data feminism also expresses a commitment to mobilizing data science to challenge existing unequal power structures and work towards justice by using research to expose instances of oppression in order to support policy intervention. According to the authors, the first step in building a more just society is to systematically analyze and expose oppression through reliable data on how such oppression is exercised. The original proposal refers mainly to statistical analyzes of large data sets. However, ethnographic thick description (Geertz, 1983), with its focus on situated meaning-making, has the potential to reveal the lived experience of oppression with a degree of nuance that big data would reasonably struggle to achieve.

The use of ethnography to unfold the perspectives of digital sex workers is also consistent with the authors' commitment to rejecting the apparent neutrality and objectivity of scientific data. Data feminism opposes this socially constructed ideal of neutrality by emphasizing the situated nature of knowledge and the urge to bring multiple perspectives into conversation, privileging those of groups otherwise marginalized from knowledge production processes. The decision to conduct research on a workforce that enjoys limited social visibility, while at the same time experiencing multiple intersecting levels of oppression, responds to this urge, and the ethnographic methodological practices employed aim at intersubjective meaning-making that makes the crucial distinction between developing knowledge about and with participants.

Methodological approaches to platform ethnography and interviewing

Platform(auto)ethnography

The exploration of adult entertainment platforms relied on comprehensive platform ethnography, integrating two key methodologies: walkthrough (Light et al., 2019) and in-depth interviews with content creators. The walkthrough method is a research approach developed to study mobile applications (though its applicability can be fairly extended to other digital environments)

through a close examination of their design, features, and intended use. It involves a systematic analysis of the digital environment, including its user interface, functionality, and content, through the creation of a user persona, which is a fictional representation of the digital environment's target user. The researcher then uses the user persona to guide them through the digital environment, following the typical user journey, and collects observations about emerging patterns and themes (Light et al., 2019). In the context of my research, the walkthrough on OnlyFans involved creating and carrying out a creator account myself (safe for work and with free subscription) to interact with potential participants and experience the platform's environment and affective atmosphere (Lupton, 2017) firsthand, and to gain insights into its affordances. The concept of affective atmosphere refers to the emotions generated by the interactions and movements of people, objects and technologies in a particular environment. It is a way of understanding how emotions are shaped by the interactions and how they, in turn, can influence behaviour and experience of subjects (Lupton, 2017).

The research design aimed at complementing interview data with a walkthrough method (Light et al., 2019) of the interfaces and account registration procedure of OnlyFans and two popular webcam platforms, namely Streamate and Live Jasmin, to gain insights into their operational dynamics. A documentary analysis (Gorsky & Mold, 2020) of these platforms' respective Terms of Services integrated such non-participatory data collection. However, the inherent opacity of the platform environment convinced me to engage in more immersive ethnographic fieldwork. This approach inevitably leaned towards autoethnography, an approach that combines elements of autobiography and ethnography (Anderson, 2006), although the primary focus remained on the experiences of the participants. Autoethnography establishes the researcher's self as both the subject and object of research (Guyotte & Sochacka, 2016). It involves the systematic analysis of the researcher's own personal experiences as a lens for understanding broader social and cultural phenomena (Zubriski et al., 2019). Autoethnography shares with conventional ethnographic fieldwork a strong emphasis on reflexivity (Winkler, 2017) and a penchant for narrative writing style, using personal anecdotes and experiences to convey empirical findings (Cuevas-Parra & Tisdall, 2019). There is a growing interest employing autoethnographic approaches in the context of digital sociology and platform studies, as evidenced by several recent scholarly contributions (Atay, 2020; Dunn & Myers, 2020; Pereira-Kotze et al., 2020; Are, 2022).

My methodological approach occupies a liminal space between ethnography and autoethnography. While I reflexively engaged with my own subjective experiences during fieldwork,

the primary focus remained on the lived experiences of my participants rather than my own. Although the introduction of autoethnography as a distinct method is relatively recent, the emphasis on reflexivity and the role of the researcher's subjectivity has long been a hallmark of ethnographic research. Consequently, previous studies the question of whether ethnography and autoethnography should be considered distinct genres or variations of the same genre (Wall, 2016). Aligning with this line of critique, my approach to fieldwork is grounded on the premise that all ethnography is inherently autoethnographic (Gariglio 2018), and, accordingly, I dedicate particular attention to personal engagement and reflexivity while keeping participants' narratives at the centre of my analysis.

My ethnographic fieldwork on OnlyFans initially involved registration with an unverified account to recruit interview participants and conduct a walkthrough (Light et al., 2019) exploration of the platform's interface. Since the primary objective was to analyze the practices of workers, the ability to post on my own profile was not essential³. However, during this recruitment phase, the response rate was low, and interactions with creators seldom resulted in interview arrangements. In an effort to enhance trust with the research participants and develop first-hand observations of the platforms' affordances, I eventually decided to position myself as a creator within the platform. Given my unwillingness to share explicit content, my profile primarily focused on promoting my study on digital sex work, advertising participant recruitment, and showcasing visual content related to my hobbies, such as pole dancing and aerial sports. The underlying assumption was that while being transparent about my role as a researcher, by showing my involvement in various leisure activities, I would present myself as a relatable figure whom participants could identify with and trust. To ensure transparency, I have opted for a free subscription to allow all interested users to access the profile.

As previously suggested, this transition was also conceived as an auto-ethnographic activity to explore the experiences of creators firsthand, albeit being aware of obvious limitations due to the non-explicit nature of my profile (in contrast with the prevailing kind of content which characterizes the platforms' landscape) and my privileged position (receiving a scholarship from the university and therefore not using the platform for material needs, and consequently having maximum freedom in

³ On OnlyFans, the ability to post and monetise content requires a verification process using ID and facial recognition, which is the key distinction between the user categories of creators and fans.

the choice of what to post - that is, not feeling the pressure to post explicit content to maintain a paying fan base). Nevertheless, establishing myself as a creator was also useful to achieve a clearer grasp of the affordances of the platform. Besides, following this change, the response rate increased as well as the number of creators willing to get involved with the project. Carrying out the profile as a 'creator' constituted an experience of immersive participant observation, involving interactions not only with potential participants but also to ordinary users ('fans') who subscribed to my profile and interacted with my content. Despite the non-sexual nature of the content, which made me expect that it would hardly gain visibility, I was surprised to find that my profile gradually gained a fanbase.

To interact with content creators who were potential participants in the research, the primary challenge was to establish communication beyond the standard mode of direct messaging on OnlyFans. This mode typically involved creators sharing mass messages to their fans on a daily basis, informing them about available content for purchase, as well as sending short teasing messages to signal their availability for a paid text chat. I struggled in the attempt to foster a deeper level of engagement and communication with the creators, moving beyond the sexualized transactional nature of these standard interactions. However, this constant overload of mass communication helped me to identify interesting patterns in the sexual scripts of creators when interacting with users.

In short, the shift from a walkthrough approach (Light et al., 2019) to a more participatory ethnographic fieldwork methodology allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the multifaceted aspects of the platform. This transition resulted in the collection of rich, contextual data that facilitated a deeper understanding of how the platform environment can influence user behaviour. In addition, the immersive approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of the platform's features and fostered meaningful communication with the research participants.

Interviews

I adopted a constructivist approach to interviewing (Creswell & Poth, 2016), which acknowledges that knowledge is contextually constructed through interaction between the researcher and the participant. This approach involves the use of open-ended questions and use follow-up probes to encourage participants to share their experiences and perspectives in their own words, and to pay attention to nonverbal communication. Much attention is given to how the researcher's subjective perspectives and biases will influence the interview process and the data analysis. However, unlike positivistic approaches which strive to minimize bias to ensure the representativeness and

generalizability of findings., constructivism is grounded on the assumption that social world is subjective, and knowledge produced in the research is essentially contextual and bounded to the researcher's subjective understanding, which is shaped by their own social positioning.

Recruitment strategies

When constructing the interview sample, the primary objective was to achieve the greatest possible diversity across various dimensions, including age, gender, sexual orientation, geographical location, and the extent of involvement in the sex work industry. The aim was to maintain an equal balance between male and female participants, spanning different age groups and hailing from various countries. I also sought to encompass individuals engaged in different segments of the digital sex market, such as webcam modelling and adult content creation, while accounting for varying degrees of professionalization and the motivations driving their involvement in the online sex industry. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the sex work community represents a concealed population within digital environments, which poses several challenges for research. Sex workers' online visibility is affected by the moderation of social media content, resulting in the suspension or shadow banning of their profiles (Are & Paasonen, 2021). This is a substantial barrier to online recruitment efforts. Furthermore, as with other forms of digital labor, the potential to monetise time spent online can discourage digital sex workers from engaging in unprofitable online interactions.

However, considering the significant amount of time digital sex workers spend online, it is understandable that engaging in unremunerated online interactions outside their work hours might be perceived as particularly burdensome. While it would have been beneficial to compensate participants for their time, this was regrettably not feasible due to a lack of institutional financial resources, since the Italian university system does not cover these expenses. To gain access to participants who were active on OnlyFans, I subscribed to their OnlyFans accounts and renewed those subscriptions until they provided consent to the use of their account after having received and read the full transcript of their interview. This gesture aimed to provide both symbolic support and position myself within the transactional community (Swartz, 2020) of OnlyFans. It was also a strictly practical decision: subscribing to creators' accounts was the only way to access participants through the platform, given that OnlyFans requires a transactional relationship before any social interaction can occur. This dynamic is fully embedded in, and encouraged by, the platform's affordances. It represents a unique element in economic relations between social actors and a novelty in digital labor, one that has not yet been fully conceptualized beyond the definition of digital patronage (Bonifacio & Vohn,

2020). Unable to use research funds for this purpose, I had to rely on my own budget. This practical challenge constituted a significant methodological hurdle that, nonetheless, offered valuable insights into the re-signification of social relationships when mediated by money. Nonetheless, it inevitably constrained my recruitment ability. Having access to greater material resources would have enabled the subscription to a larger number of accounts, thus allowing for the attempt of involving a more extensive pool of participants.

For recruiting webcam models, this issue was not present as webcam platforms do not offer subscriptions; payment occurs automatically while watching live streams. I proposed showing support by making a small donation (an option allowed by most webcam platforms in the form of a predesigned Wishlist, but this suggestion was declined, with participants stressing that they preferred to contribute to the research voluntarily. Another potential constraint on building relationships with participants might have been their awareness of the pervasive societal stigma associated with sex work, which could have heightened their reluctance to disclose personal information.

Considering the challenges posed by limited time and resources in ensuring a systematic sampling approach, a pragmatic choice was made to employ a convenience sampling method that combined various recruitment strategies. Convenience sampling is a commonly used method for selecting study participants, particularly when it is difficult or impractical to obtain a representative sample from the target population (Winterstein & Habisch, 2021). This sampling technique involves selecting individuals who are readily available and accessible to the researcher (Mete et al., 2019). Convenience sampling is often employed in situations where time, cost, and logistical constraints make it challenging to use other sampling methods (Jager et al., 2017). Since participants are not randomly selected from the population of interest, the findings may not be representative of the larger population (Paluri & Mehra, 2016). Therefore, convenience sampling is typically used when the goal of the study is to examine underlying theoretical concepts and relationships rather than making generalizable claims (Winterstein & Habisch, 2021).

The initial participants, who served as crucial gatekeepers and key informants, were accessed through the mobilization of my personal social network. Subsequently, I sought out adult content creators on social media, particularly those with an active profile on OnlyFans, who were part of the network of the initially recruited participants. I reached out to them, providing a concise yet clear explanation of the research's objectives before proposing an interview. Much like content creators

need to navigate a broader social media ecosystem to build their fanbase, a researcher must utilize multiple social media platforms for recruitment purposes. Inspired by the principle of 'following the thing, the medium and the natives' (Caliandro, 2017), recruitment efforts involved tracking potential participants through the various platforms they used to gain visibility. In practice, this process proved to be a trial-and-error endeavour that included both successful and unsuccessful attempts. These attempts included the circulation of call for action on social media, which was subsequently shared by some of the participants already recruited. As a result, I received direct messages from some interested workers who wished to contribute to the research, and interviews were arranged accordingly.

Given the strong interest in fostering in-depth ethnographic engagement with OnlyFans as the primary case study, a conscious decision was made to conduct all interactions with OnlyFans content creators within the platform itself once contact had been established. This approach was preferred to communication via social media or alternative means, as it allowed for the exploration of implicit social norms of interaction shaped by the affective atmosphere of the platform (Lupton, 2017), where all interactions tend to be heavily monetized. As mentioned above, this involved purchasing a monthly subscription to their OnlyFans profile and initiating contact via direct message. It is worth noting that this method sometimes entailed additional costs beyond the subscription fee, as some creators required a 'tip' to be attached to each message, which is a common practice on OnlyFans.

I pragmatically prioritized contacting accounts that allowed for free messaging, albeit I initially considered include a 'tip' with the recruitment message as a spontaneous gesture of appreciation and support. Yet, I observed that creators seemed to overlook such transactions, which I interpreted as a consequence of their accustomed nature to receiving continuous monetary contributions from subscribers. Quickly recognizing that 'tipping' had no discernible impact on response rates or the overall friendliness of interactions, I decided to discontinue this practice and limited my financial support to subscription purchases. These financial constraints, due to the inability of research funds for this purpose, were a key challenge I faced in gaining access to the field and establishing meaningful interactions with content creators. The challenges posed by such financial considerations, should be taken into account in further studies of digital patronage platforms. Due to differences in the availability and flexibility of institutional funding in different university contexts, there is a potential risk that research on certain topics may only be feasible in more privileged academic settings.

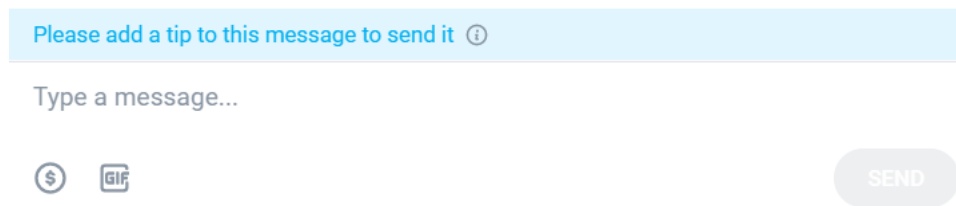


Figure 1: OnlyFans' design enables for paid chat.

In practice, my recruitment efforts involved subscribing to a total of 109 profiles. However, only 26 creators were successfully engaged in the research. The limited turnout of participants presented an ongoing challenge marked by unpredictability. Many content creators initially responded enthusiastically to the recruitment message but then ceased communication once the interview details were disclosed. Some creators confirmed their availability but repeatedly postponed scheduled meetings, eventually withdrawing from communication altogether. Notably, a few participants, after personal contacts were exchanged and interview dates were arranged, vanished just before the planned meeting when asked to review and sign the informed consent form.

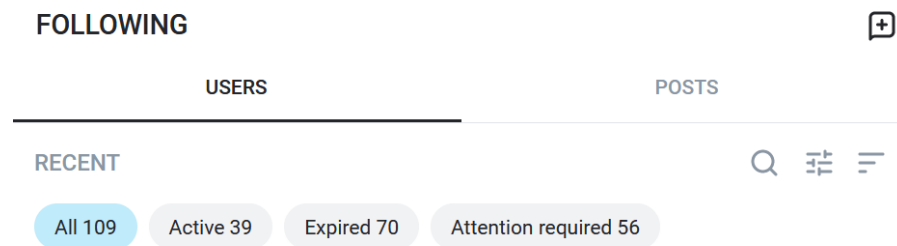


Figure 2: List of followed accounts on OnlyFans

I interpreted this reluctance as a consequence of several factors: the exhaustion stemming from the daily overload of interactions they engaged in, a heightened sense of exposure associated with sharing personal experiences, which could have been exacerbated by the act of signing the informed consent form. There is no need to stress that the informed consent procedure is precisely designed to ensure participants have complete control over their accounts, and it serves as a vital ethical safeguard in research. Hence, navigating the tensions between prioritizing participants' autonomy and fulfilling ethical requirements represented a challenging dilemma. Furthermore, as previously noted, many participants exhibited a distinct self-entrepreneurial attitude marked by their capacity to monetize every social interaction. This mindset seemed to be shaped by their engagement within

the peculiar environment of OnlyFans (constantly pushing for monetization) and presented an additional challenge to the process of building relationships. Recognizing these limitations, I opted for a pragmatic approach, giving priority to recruitment within the social networks of participants who had already been recruited. After conducting the initial interviews, a snowballing approach was employed to expand the sample in two ways: firstly, by requesting participants to facilitate connections with their colleagues, and secondly, by subscribing to and contacting users who were listed among their 'friends' on OnlyFans. While this sampling strategy proved effective in expanding the sample size, it resulted in a noticeable demographic imbalance. The majority of participants, though not exclusively, were young cisgender women in their early twenties, predominantly from Western countries. Notably, the sample exhibited a significant skew towards Italian participants. While recognising the crucial methodological limitations of snowball sampling in terms of introducing bias and oversampling certain sub-populations, given the inherent challenges of recruiting participants from the digital sex workforce, I adopted a pragmatic approach that prioritised access to this population.

Interview sample

The final sample comprised 35 participants, consisting of 25 self-identified women and 10 self-identified men, all engaged in various segments of digital sex work. Specifically:

- 17 participants were exclusively involved in content creation on OnlyFans.
- 4 participants exclusively worked as webcam models.
- 2 participants were engaged in both adult webcam modeling and content creation on OnlyFans.
- 5 participants were active on both OnlyFans and Pornhub.
- 3 participants combined webcam modeling with offline sex work.
- 2 participants worked on both OnlyFans and as offline sex workers.

A breakdown of the participants' demographic characteristics, the type of digital sex work they engaged in, and their chosen platforms can be found in the table below.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Nationality	Platform work
Margot	F	22	Italian	OnlyFans
Valeria	F	21	Italian	OnlyFans
Venere	F	22	Italian	OnlyFans
Ricky	M	33	American	OnlyFans
Alex	M	23	Italian	OnlyFans
Eugenie	F	25	French	OnlyFans
Andrea	F	32	British	OnlyFans
Litz	F	36	American	OnlyFans
Eleanor	F	32	Ukrainian	OnlyFans
Rebecca	F	35	French	OnlyFans
Rita	F	29	Italian	OnlyFans
Allison	F	31	Canadian	OnlyFans
Valeria	F	21	Italian	OnlyFans
Jacob	M	29	British	OnlyFans
Beatrice	F	24	Italian	OnlyFans; Pornhub
Serena	F	20	Italian	OnlyFans; Chaturbate
Ursula	F	27	Italian	OnlyFans; Pornhub; Cam4
Christian	M	29	Italian	OnlyFans; Pornhub
Fabrizio	M	36	Italian	OnlyFans; MYM; Cam4
Mattia	M	47	Italian	OnlyFans; MYM; Fansly
Karen	F	30	Canadian	OnlyFans; MyFreeCams

Clotilde	F	23	Italian	OnlyFans; Pornhub
Fabrizio	M	36	Italian	OnlyFans; MYM; Cam4
Mattia	M	47	Italian	OnlyFans; MYM; Fansly
Lily	F	31	Italian	OnlyFans Patreon
Stella	F	22	Italian	OnlyFans; Chaturbate; Stripchat; Bongacams
Lissandro	M	28	British	OnlyFans; Pornhub
Cindy	F	21	Italian	OnlyFans Instagram
Cherry	F	30	American	OnlyFans; Chaturbate
Patrick	M	35	American	OnlyFans; Cam4
Rose	F	31	French	OnlyFans; Seeking
Kat	F	34	American	My Free Cams
Peach	F	24	Danish	Chaturbate; Seeking;
Lavinia	F	40	Italian	Cam4
Dimitri	M	32	Italian	Cam4

Table 1: Sample of interviews participants.

All participants were offered the opportunity of choosing pseudonyms to protect their privacy. Some declined, insisting that I use their nicknames instead. In these cases, I gave them pseudonyms myself to ensure homogeneity in this respect.

Themes of the interviews

The interviews followed a semi-structured approach, which involves the use of a pre-designed list of questions while also allowing and even encouraging digressions and in-depth exploration. The primary themes addressed in these interviews encompassed the material organization of labor, the

creative and relational aspects of digital sex work, the management of boundaries between professional and private spheres, the strategic use of social media for promotion, the negotiation of social media content moderation policies, and the broader topics of job satisfaction and overall well-being. For this purpose, the interview guide was structured into six distinct sections, with the initial section focusing on the participants' personal background and beginning of their careers in the digital sex industry.

Adopting a biographical approach to interviewing (Rosenthal, 2004), allowed for deeper reflection on the significance of participants' work experiences in the context of their broader life narratives and facilitated the identification of common patterns. For example, many participants spoke of their origins in small towns, religious backgrounds and strict family upbringings that had instilled a sense of unease about sexual exploration during their teenage years. In their narratives, the transition to the digital sex industry was portrayed as an emancipatory life change, enabling a shift towards a more playful and liberated approach to their own sexuality. Another prevalent pattern in the participants' past experiences was the experience of bullying at school, often linked to unconventional aesthetic features or clothing styles. They emphasised the role of online visibility in boosting their confidence and enabling them to overcome the sense of social stigma they had experienced in the past.

As mentioned earlier, the initial set of questions also encompassed participants' motivations and practical experiences when entering the digital sex industry. This included inquiries about their information-seeking practices, safety measures adopted to protect their personal information, and their experiences with the technological configurations of the platforms. The aim of this line of questioning was to test the overly simplistic notion that digital sex work is an easily accessible occupation. On the contrary, these platforms often necessitate complex identity verification processes, which prompted some participants to delay the commencement of their careers after multiple unsuccessful attempts. In the context of discussing their entry into the sex work industry, considerable attention was devoted to the construction of their digital personas. Interestingly, the majority of respondents firmly rejected the idea of portraying a distinct character in relation to their audience. They emphasized spontaneity and authenticity in managing their profiles. This aspect aligns with the societal imaginary of OnlyFans content creators, and the passionate work ethos associated with digital sex work in previous research. However, when participants were prompted to describe their performance style in greater detail, it became evident that their authenticity was

meticulously choreographed. They achieved this by prioritizing the display of particular bodily features, aesthetics, or communicative styles to cater to specific niche audiences. Understanding that participants perceived this process as a means of navigating niche markets, rather than creating distinct characters, led to a revision of the question's wording accordingly. The inherent adaptability of ethnographic interviewing allows for continuous refinement of data collection methods, fostering immersive exploration of participants' perspectives through their own terminology.

The second part of the interview guide covered the technical aspects of producing adult content (for OnlyFans creators) and live streaming (for webcam models), from the specific equipment used to the preparation of the set and the aesthetic work carried out before shooting or streaming (choice of outfit, make-up, etc.). The aim was twofold: in terms of knowledge production about the research topic, discussing these aspects helped me to see the invisible labor behind the sexual performance, and to validate the hypothesis that digital sex work can be, in fact, an expensive activity. Exploring the material resources needed for a successful career revealed that these requirements could be a barrier to entry for newcomers and a challenge for less well-equipped creators. On a more practical level, the discussion of these technical aspects had a positive impact on the interview process. It provided an easy conversation segment that allowed participants to move away from the broader and often sensitive biographical introduction that typically opened the interview. This interplay of personal and practical questions helped to facilitate comfortable communication with the participants.

The third set of questions pertained to the organization of work, encompassing participants' preferred workdays and hours, as well as the delicate task of negotiating boundaries between their professional and private lives. This section played a pivotal role in unveiling the labor intensity that characterizes the lived experience of online sex work. Initially, many participants praised their transition to online sex work, highlighting the increased autonomy they gained in managing their time compared to their previous employments. However, as the interview probed further into the number of hours devoted to their work each day, an ambivalence emerged. Despite the initial perception of greater flexibility, many participants disclosed that they found themselves constantly engaged in work, struggling to establish clear boundaries between their personal and professional lives.

The fourth section of the interviews was dedicated to exploring participants' use of social media platforms for networking and self-branding purposes, as well as their strategies for navigating content moderation policies and the development of algorithmic imaginaries. Interestingly, the significance attributed to these aspects varied significantly depending on the specific segments of platform sex work in which participants were engaged. While webcam models often expressed a lack of interest in using social media for professional purposes, OnlyFans content creators provided detailed explanations of their promotional strategies, offering insights into the development of intricate subjective imaginaries related to each social media platform they engaged with or strategically chose to abstain from.

The fifth section of the interview delved into the affective and relational aspects of digital sex work. This decision to address these aspects towards the end of the interview was made due to their potentially delicate nature. However, in some instances, the participants themselves initiated discussions on these topics during an earlier phase of the interview. Following the semi-structured approach, participants were given complete freedom to express their thoughts and follow the natural flow of their narratives.

The sixth and final section aimed to take a broader perspective by prompting participants to reflect on their working experiences in more general terms. They were encouraged to recall what they found most enjoyable about their work and what aspects they found challenging or distasteful. It was intriguing to note that, despite the uniqueness of everyone's subjective experiences, reflections on the pros and cons tended to reveal recurring patterns. In line with the biographical approach adopted (Rosenthal, 2004), participants were also invited to consider the future aspects of their work in a lifelong perspective. Lastly, the closing question, framed as: "If someone interested in entering the sex industry came to you for advice, what advice would you give them?" proved to be extremely insightful, as it highlighted the highly entrepreneurial approach that characterises this occupational segment.

Modality of interviewing

Conducting interviews online has become increasingly prevalent in qualitative research, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, leading various researchers to claim that remote interviews can be as effective as in-person interviews (Samuk & Burchi, 2022, Brown et al., 2021). In

this research, the commitment to include participants from diverse countries, along with the logistical challenge of conducting in-person interviews due to their dispersed locations, necessitated the utilization of primarily online interviews. This decision was further influenced by the fact that only a small minority of participants (3 out of 35) resided in the same city where I was based. While it is acknowledged that technologically mediated interactions inherently lack the richness of physical presence and bodily experience, in this context, conducting in-person interviews was an impractical alternative due to the geographical dispersion of the participants. However, the participants' accustomed online performance translated into a notable ease and fluidity during the interviews which mitigated the limitations associated with online interviewing. Most interviews, all except three, were conducted online, primarily through video calls using platforms such as Zoom or Jitsi. These platforms facilitated anonymous participation through web browsers, eliminating the need for downloading software or dealing with registration procedures. However, if participants expressed a specific preference, I let them decide which tool to use for the video call. Conducting interviews online was, indeed, also intended as a means of empowering participants to disclose information, for example by allowing them to choose whether to disclose via video or interact via audio only, and to protect their anonymity through nicknames.

In addition, a small subset of participants asked to conduct a written interview because of mental health issues. Written interviews present significant limitations, such as the absence of nonverbal cues and fewer opportunities for clarifications and follow-up. Additionally, typing can be tiring for the interviewee. Conversely, the interactivity of oral interviews can foster engaging communication and the ability to observe nonverbal cues, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of participants' accounts. However, oral interviews are conducted in real-time, which can pose problems due to scheduling constraints, especially when participants have limited availability, as is the case with the population considered for this research. Furthermore, synchronous long interviews can be exhausting for participants, particularly when conducted online with a population that already spends long work hours online; this aspect compels the researcher to practice effective time management, as the interviewee's attention and engagement tend to decline over time, leading to more superficial responses. Written interviews, on the other hand, can be perceived as less tiring due to the possibility of taking breaks and may be less emotionally demanding, which is particularly relevant given the sensitivity of interview topics. Additionally, written interviews better ensure participants' privacy. On a practical level, they facilitate the use of the material as it does not require transcription. However, they constrain the relational dimension, which is key to constructivist interviewing. Interestingly,

participants who initially requested written interviews often ended up switching to voice notes during the course of the interviews, suggesting that the written format may have been useful as an icebreaker, but participants became more comfortable with progressive engagement with the interview topics.

Data analysis

All interviews' recordings were fully transcribed manually by the author. The complete transcriptions were analyzed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2019) using the software NVivo. Reflexive thematic analysis is a data-driven analytical strategy that involves developing an original classification of a large corpus of text into main categories, or themes, that reflect a pattern of shared meaning organized around a core concept or idea. Unlike other qualitative approaches to content analysis, such as coding reliability (Boyatzis, 1998; Guest et al., 2012) and codebook (King & Brooks, 2018; Ritchie & Spencer, 1994), reflexive thematic analysis is essentially inductive, hence it employs a less structured and formalized coding scheme. These alternative approaches typically involve early theme development and conceptualize themes as topic summaries. In contrast, reflexive thematic analysis requires themes to be gradually developed throughout the analysis, with considerable analytic and interpretative work on the part of the researcher. This process is driven by deep engagement with the data, and the researcher's positionality shapes the emerging codes. While other approaches aim to minimize researcher bias, reflexive thematic analysis acknowledges and embraces the subjective nature of coding. The themes developed throughout the analysis do not 'accurately' summarize the scrutinized text, but are instead conceived meaning-based patterns, aimed to provide a coherent and compelling interpretation grounded in the empirical data. The coding process is organic and flexible, allowing codes to evolve following the researcher's increasing understanding of the data and to overlap and intersect in meaningful ways (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Cross-platform analysis

The fourth chapter of the thesis, besides drawing on interviews with research participants explores the self-branding strategies of OnlyFans content creators on Instagram and Tiktok, by employing qualitative methodologies inspired by the digital methods paradigm (Rogers, 2013). The digital methods paradigm is an emerging epistemological approach to Internet research that pushes researcher to 'follow the medium', namely, to conceive the Web not as simply as an object of study but as an endless source of methods (Rogers, 2013). At the core of this framework, theoretically

grounded on Actor-Network-Theory (Latour, 1999)⁴ is an emphasis on data-driven research through the employment of ‘natively digital’ methods to collect, analyze and visualize data. The underlying premise is that the increasing pervasiveness of digital technologies the everyday practices of social actors (including researchers) undermines conventional dichotomies between the real and the virtual. Therefore, research should move beyond the study of online cultures as distinctive entities but rather investigate digital phenomena as revealing insights into broader cultural phenomena (Rogers, 2009). To do so, researchers are pushed to exploit the potential of the natural logic the Internet applies to itself in gathering, ordering, and analysing data. In other words, to shape the research design and methodologies according to the inner mechanisms of the field of study.

As it has been seen in the previous section on digital ethnography, the digital methods framework is by no means the first scholarly attempt to develop meaningful methodologies for the study of web cultures. However, the approaches above mentioned involve a methodological adaptation rather than a fundamental reconfiguration of research methodologies. In contrast, the digital methods paradigm represents a multidisciplinary effort aimed at the intersection of qualitative and computational methodologies. Its emphasis on digital research tools may give the impression of being more aligned with computer science than sociological research. However, an emerging trend within sociological scholarship has expanded our understanding of the scope of digital methods, emphasizing the potential of this epistemological approach for qualitative research (Caliandro & Gandini, 2016; Caliandro, 2017; Airoldi, 2018). This stream of digital ethnography has introduced valuable analytical concepts to guide ethnographers within the dynamic landscape of social media environments. These concepts are articulated around the notions of community, public, crowd, self-presentation as a tool, and user as a device. For the purpose of this research, it's essential to highlight that the last two concepts, self-presentation as a tool and user as a device, hold particular significance and serve as important points of reference.

The concept of self-presentation as a tool underscores the idea that digital identity is a dynamic construct that emerges from the contingent self-presentation strategies developed by users across the

⁴ Actor-network theory is a sociological stream that investigates the complex relationship between humans and machines in their everyday life as well as their interaction in the co-construction of social reality (Caliandro, 2017: 8).

various online environments they engage in (Caliandro, 2017: 16). Given that content creators actively interact with multiple social media platforms, it becomes imperative to consider how the unique characteristics of these digital spaces shape the production of their digital personas. These distinctive features of each platform influence how content creators present themselves and manage their online identities. Conversely, the principle of 'user as a device' is grounded in the notion that every action a user performs online generates metadata. These metadata serve as a valuable resource that should inform researchers' understanding of the topic under investigation. In this sense, users are not passive entities but active collaborators, continually contributing to the creation of vast amounts of information (Caliandro, 2016: 21). Their online activities produce valuable data, allowing researchers to gain insights into user behaviors, trends, and interactions, thus providing an ongoing flow of information that informs the research process. Conducting ethnography online demands a keen awareness of the inherently transient nature of digital spaces. Airoidi (2018) has introduced a heuristic framework for understanding online environments in a twofold manner. On one hand, a substantial portion of online social interactions occurs within relatively stable and bounded socio-technical contexts, which can be likened to 'places'. Simultaneously, a significant segment of social media users' digital experiences unfolds within volatile environments such as social networks' feeds, social media aggregators, and evolving collections of content associated with specific keywords or tags. The former is referred to as 'contextual fields', while the latter is termed 'meta-fields'. Ethnographic research necessitates engagement with both contextual and meta-fields, but the methodological approach must be adapted accordingly. Contextual fields lend themselves to more conventional ethnographic observations, which are amenable to direct, immersive engagement. In contrast, the understanding of the social dynamics within meta-fields often requires computational analysis to navigate the complex interplay of content and interactions. Furthermore, as a reaction to the prevailing emphasis on multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995) as the predominant framework for digital research, Airoidi contends that internet research calls for a novel form of ethnography, described as 'unsited'. This 'unsited' ethnography is not tied to any particular location or bounded context, as it must address the fluid and rapidly changing nature of digital spaces.

To sum up the aim of this evolving trend in digital ethnography, which this research is built upon, is to apply the foundational principles of digital methods to ethnographic inquiry. This involves following the object, the medium, and the natives. In essence, it entails tracing the circulation of an empirical object within a particular online environment or across different online environments, while observing the specific social formations that emerge from the interactions of digital devices and users

(Caliandro, 2017: 10). A notable innovation within this methodological approach is the proposition to move beyond the conventional imperative of gathering a vast sample size to ensure the reliability of analysis. While big data approaches allow for broader generalizations, shifting the focus towards 'small data' allows for more in-depth observations and the development of nuanced interpretations (Caliandro & Gandini, 2016).

Inspired by the framework of digital sociological inquiry outlined above, this study conducts an exploratory cross-platform analysis of the self-branding strategies of OnlyFans content creators on Instagram and TikTok. Cross-platform analysis is a kind of research design to examine how a particular type of content (typically user generated content related to an impactful societal event or issue, in this case promotional production on OnlyFans content creators) circulates across multiple social media platforms while considering the distinctive user cultures and digital objects that characterize each platform (Rogers, 2017). This approach addresses the limitations of single-platform studies and the methodological challenges of comparing different social media platforms. Even when platforms have similar affordances, they may not be used in the same way by their different user populations. Therefore, the purpose of cross-platform analysis is to identify both shared and distinctive elements in how content circulates on different platform environments.

In this study, the cross-platform analysis is conducted through an ethnographic content analysis (Altheide, 1987) of the accounts of 100 OnlyFans creators active on the two platforms. The goal is twofold: on the one hand, compare how different creators promote themselves on the same platform; on the other hand, to analyze whether, and how, individual evolve their promotional style over time within the same platform, and how they relate to different platform environments. This section of the research aims at integrating the data collected throughout the interviews, inevitably affected by the small size and limited heterogeneity of the sample.

The research design of the cross-platform analysis is informed by extensive fieldwork observations of participants' social media practices and their accounts of this crucial aspect of their work. One of the key dilemmas faced by adult content creators advertising themselves on social media is the tension between achieving visibility to their audiences while remaining hidden enough to prevent algorithmic content moderation (Are, 2022). Interview data and fieldwork observations revealed that creators tend to use both Instagram and TikTok to advertise their OnlyFans account, while adopting different self-presentation strategies to prevent moderation. For example, there is a

consensus among creators that displaying a link to another platform in their TikTok bio attracts content moderation, while Instagram moderation targets direct links to OnlyFans profiles but allows for the display of generic links. Accordingly, creators tend to display their Instagram nickname in their TikTok bio so that followers can find their Instagram profiles and subsequently access their OnlyFans profile through the Linktree presented in the Instagram bio. In light of this widespread strategy, the sampling approach embraces the principles of multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995), which exhorts the ethnographer to follow participants throughout their movements across space, by literally following the population of interest from TikTok to Instagram. However, as anticipated, creators try to avoid being detected by the platforms' algorithms as sex workers to prevent being banned or shadow banned. Therefore, one cannot simply browse the TikTok search engine for OnlyFans users, which poses a challenge for sampling. At the same time, the need to be found by ordinary users pushes creators to creatively develop a sort of shared code language to hint to their social media audiences of their role as adult entertainers. Ethnographically collected data about this allusive communication formed the basis for the sampling protocol. As will be seen in the next section, the use of a particular array of emojis in the bio is at the core of creators' self-presentation.

Sampling

The sampling protocol aimed at including users with active profiles on OnlyFans, Instagram and Tiktok. As anticipated, users were first recruited on Tiktok using a number of queries developed through previous ethnographic observations. Among these accounts, I selected those displaying an Instagram nickname in their bios and, after visiting their Instagram profiles, I included in the sample users displaying in their Instagram bio a linktree directing to an existing OnlyFans account.

The following are the queries experimented on Tiktok:

- “❤️💎⁵: 23 users included in the sample⁶.
- “💎❤️”: 32 users included;

⁵ This emoji combination conventionally represents Onlyfans because the colours of the two hearts resemble those of the platform's interface.

⁶ As previously explained, the sampling criteria required the user being active on Tiktok, Instagram, and Onlyfans, and displaying their Instagram nickname in their Tiktok biography.

- “🚫”: 15 users included;
- “❤️🚫”: 33 users included;
- “🚫❤️”: 23 users included;

Interestingly, two other queries that were initially meant to be explored, consisting of other emoji combinations commonly associated with exclusive content, could not be used as they were targeted by Tiktok moderation.

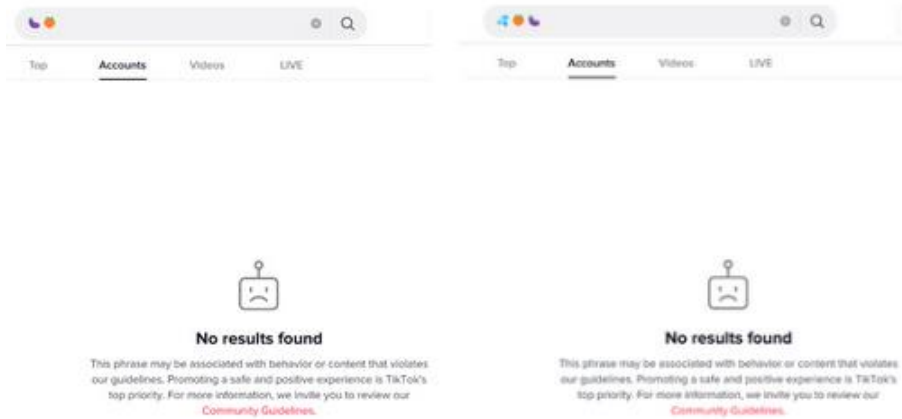


Figure 3: The emoji combinations used in the query violates Tiktok's security policy.

This initial sampling has included 154 users, among them 10 appeared to self-identify as men and 144 as women, originating from 13 countries, namely: United States, Canada, Australia, Colombia, Ecuador, France, Ireland, Italy, Mexico, Panama, United Kingdom, Ukraine Male users were removed from the sample because their number was too limited.

In order to increase the size and variability of the sample, a second sampling was carried out via snowballing on Instagram, starting from the accounts originating from the countries which were less represented in the initial sample. Snowballing on Instagram involved recruiting new users from the social networks of already sampled users. In practice, it implied starting with a list of creators from the less represented countries, finding (presumably less popular) creators among their followers and including in the sample those who matched the criteria. The second step was to find other (likely

more famous) creators among their followers and include in the sample those who matched the criteria. Taking into consideration both users among the followers of and those followed by the accounts in the initial sample was intended to ensure stratification in terms of popularity, in the attempt to achieve a representative mix of both popular and less popular creators. This sampling procedure certainly carries inherent risks of bias and standardization, particularly since the accounts from which the snowballing process initiated were chosen arbitrarily. However, it's important to note that the research design didn't entail a randomized sample but rather a purposive one, which required users to be simultaneously active on OnlyFans, Instagram, and Tiktok for professional purposes. The primary focus here was on increasing the size and variability of the sample to achieve a somewhat representative mix of both popular and less popular creators.

At this stage of recruitment, the sample comprised 200 users. This particular issue sheds light on the unique challenges faced by this user population and the complexities of accessing their experiences for research. It raises thought-provoking considerations regarding the ephemerality of social media content and its implications for research, as previously discussed by Bainotti, Caliandro, and Gandini (2021) in relation to Instagram stories. The key distinction to emphasize here is that what is rendered ephemeral by the platform's design is not a specific digital object but rather a particular user category. This brings to the forefront the intricate dynamics of platform moderation and user categorization, which significantly impact the work and visibility of digital sex workers.

Data collection

All posts created by the participants in the sample on Instagram and TikTok were downloaded using the browser extension Zeeschiumer, developed by the Digital Method Initiative (Peeters, 2023). This tool allows researchers to collect data from social media platforms without having to write any code, making it particularly suitable for researchers without prior experience in computer programming. Zeeschiumer also offers flexibility and scalability advantages over other scraping techniques. On the one hand, it can be used to collect a wide variety of data, including posts, comments, likes, and follower information, and to select specific users or groups of users. On the other hand, it allows for collecting data from large numbers of social media accounts without crashing, unlike other user-friendly scraping tools whose data collection is limited to the first few rows of posts that appear on the webpage. This makes Zeeschiumer an appropriate tool for large-scale research projects. In addition, Zeeschiumer can collect data on the order in which users view content, which facilitates longitudinal analyzes. Once the sample was constructed, I opened each user's profile (on

both Instagram and TikTok) with the extension enabled and then started scrolling down until all the posts on the profile were downloaded. This resulted in a dataset that included all posts published by each user on both platforms. Next, I cleaned up the dataset to make it easier to identify posts on both platforms that could be traced back to the same user.

Data analysis

Drawing on the analytical concepts of ‘user as a device’ and ‘self-presentation as a tool’ (Caliandro, 2017), the data analysis involved an ethnographic content analysis (Altheide, 1987) of creators’ promotional activities on the two platforms. For each user, a random sample of four posts was selected from each of the following three time periods: the first third of the user's posting history, the second third of the user's posting history, and the last third of the user's posting history. This criterion aimed at making the sample of posts as representative as possible of the user's entire posting history, by preventing bias toward any particular period.

Ethnographic content analysis involves the systematic analysis of cultural artifacts, such as texts, images, and videos aimed at understanding the meaning and context of these artifacts, as well as the social and cultural practices they reflect. In contrast to other approaches to content analysis, codes are developed inductively, rather than being predefined, allowing for the identification of significant patterns and themes that may not have been anticipated in the research design. Another key element is that such cultural artifacts are conceived as contextual, namely, to be understood in relation to the context in which they were produced and consumed, as well as the perspectives of the social actors who produced and consumed them (Altheide, 1987). In this study, the context was provided by insights from interviews with adult content creators and ethnographic observations of their social media practices, both of which were conducted in the first stage of fieldwork. This study combined the principles of ethnographic content analysis (Altheide, 1987) and reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) to analyze the data. The goal was to validate the findings gathered throughout the interviews by integrating such small data (Caliandro & Gandini, 2016) with a large body of data produced by a wide heterogeneous sample of users, in order to compensate for the limitations of the sample and the inevitable biases of self-report accounts.

Limitations

The methodological approach adopted in this research presents certain limitations, primarily related to the sample size and its diversity. The relatively small sample size restricts the representativeness of the findings. While qualitative research does not aim for statistical generalizability, a larger interview sample would have supported broader claims about the research topic.

Another weakness of the sample lies in its limited variability in terms of gender, age, and geographical origin. The majority of participants were Western women in their 20s or 30s, with a significant proportion of Italian participants. Remarkably, most participants displayed cisgender identity and middle-class sociocultural backgrounds. These overlapping layers of privilege inevitably influence their work experiences in the digital sex industry. Expanding the sample size would allow for a more comprehensive assessment of how different geographical, socioeconomic backgrounds, and gender identities influence the decision to engage in specific segments of the sex industry and the subjective experience of digital sex work. This weakness is partly due to the challenges of recruiting digital sex workers, who are a relatively hidden population in digital environments, partly due to social media's tendency to limit their visibility through content moderation. Furthermore, marginalized groups, including queer individuals and ethnic minorities, are disproportionately affected by de-platforming tendencies. Consequently, future research should seek to engage with digital sex workers from these underrepresented groups. Such efforts would greatly contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the lived experience of digital sex work that takes intersectionality as a reference.

However, as previously discussed, the difficulty in accessing the population of interest with limited time and material resources led to the pragmatic decision to engage with participants who were readily available and accessible. Additionally, except for one case, all participants were interviewed only once. The possibility of conducting multiple interviews over time would have allowed for a longitudinal understanding of their experiences.

The commitment to advancing the exploration of this under-researched phenomenon compelled me to adopt flexibility of data collection while ensuring methodological rigor in grounding the findings on extensive ethnographic observations.

Chapter 3. "OnlyFans pays you to flirt, not just to shoot". The re-socialization of economic transactions in digital patronage

Introduction

This chapter aims to uncover the distinctive characteristics of platformised sex work as a form of digital labor. Specifically, it focuses on digital patronage (Bonifacio & Wohn, 2020) within the adult entertainment industry, a domain in which the penetration of platforms has led to an entire reconfiguration of labor relations. This reconfiguration distances this form of labor from the conventional conceptualisations proposed by both platform labor scholarship and the existing literature on digital sex work.

The discussion is guided by the following research question:

What innovations in labor relations has the platform model of digital patronage introduced in the context of platformized adult entertainment? In essence, what are the main features that distinguish adult content creation on digital patronage platforms from alternative forms of digital sex work?

To elucidate the characteristics of digital patronage platforms and how they shape the lived experience of sexual labor, the chapter first traces the diverse backgrounds of the research participants, their motivations for joining the platformised sex industry, and their subjective experiences of using adult entertainment platforms. Identifying key patterns in workers' backgrounds and motivations for becoming adult content creators on OnlyFans demonstrates the platform's appeal to a diverse workforce.

Ethnographic evidence is used in conjunction with theoretical work to support the argument that OnlyFans' design has reconfigured the economic dimension of social interactions in digital sex work, transforming user engagement into a valuable commodity. Central to this process is the explicit economic valorisation of social interactions to the extent that they become monetizable assets. In this context, varying degrees of interactivity are endowed with different economic values, depending on the popularity (or reputation) of the creators and their ability to market themselves by skilfully navigating the specific expectations of their audience. The platform's unique ability to convert every user interaction into monetizable assets constitutes a re-socialisation of economic elements. This represents a legitimisation of the economic dimension in social relations, which are socially constructed through user interactions shaped by the platform's socio-technical infrastructures.

The platform's unique approach to monetising social relationships is achieved through three main features. Firstly, the infrastructural integration of a wide range of services previously offered by distinct platforms. Secondly, a process of mainstreaming sex work through the ongoing interplay of Onlyfans and social media. Finally, and most importantly, affordances that directly promote the monetisation of each interaction. The first aspect relates to the integration of a growing range of pre-existing digital sexual services within a unified platform environment. In line with trends observed in other sectors of the platform economy, OnlyFans exhibits a tipping tendency (Riekhof et al., 2022) - a phenomenon in which a single platform emerges, offering a wide range of services and gaining significant market share by exploiting network effects (Roberts & Candi, 2014; Poell et al., 2021). This dynamic has positioned OnlyFans as the leading platform for digital adult entertainment, resulting in huge revenue streams from the work of creators around the world. Second, the mainstreaming of sex work, brought about by the visibility of OnlyFans workers in media representations and the unprecedented intertwining of the platform with social media, to the point where the platform itself presents itself as a paid social media site rather than an adult entertainment site, in order to mitigate the social stigma associated with sex work and pornography. One obvious aspect of OnlyFans' commitment to resembling mainstream social media is the striking similarity between its interface design and that of social media platforms. The platform's communicative efforts to distance itself from the realm of sex work are eloquently summarised by its tagline 'Make your influence pay', which targets social media influencers and celebrities as its primary audience. Furthermore, the platform's terms of service allow for the exchange of sexual content, albeit without explicitly acknowledging sex workers as its predominant demographic and main source of revenue. Intriguingly, this allows for the exchange of sexual content simply by omitting it from the list of

prohibited behaviours. However, this lack of explicit recognition has significant implications for the safety of sex workers, as noted by scholars such as Van der Nagel (2021). Without recognition as a relevant workforce within the platform, sex workers remain at risk of exclusion from its market. This phenomenon reflects a broader trend in digital landscapes, where user categories that produce sexual content initially drive user engagement but are subsequently marginalised once the platform gains sustained popularity.

The third and most significant innovation concerns the way in which the design and affordances of OnlyFans have repurposed paid social relations. This aspect is explored through a comparative analysis with adult webcam modelling, the primary alternative in platform-based sex work. By exploring the platform's particularities, especially in terms of content accessibility, visibility regimes, and specific modes of user interaction, it will be shown that the most important feature of this platform model is the central role of paid interactivity between creators and fans. This is demonstrated by the platform's approach to monetising social relationships, which marks a transformative shift in the landscape of digital sex work. Unlike the freemium model of webcam platforms, where payment is framed as spontaneous gifts from the audience that streamers diligently earn through successful performances in 'free' rooms, OnlyFans' digital patronage model (Bonifacio & Wohn, 2020) positions social interaction not only as central, but also as the key revenue element. This repositions monetised sociality at the heart of the labor process of digital sex work, highlighting the centrality of interpersonal interactions as a monetisable asset, fully embedded in the design of the platform and facilitated by its affordances. This shift represents a significant evolution in the field of digital sex work, highlighting an evolving interplay between social dynamics and economic activities.

The discussion will begin with a brief summary of the existing literature on sex work on OnlyFans, while a more comprehensive analysis is available in the literature review chapter. Additionally, the theoretical paradigms proposed by Zelizer (2005) Swartz (2020) and Jarrett (2022) will be employed as an analytical framework, offering critical perspectives to inform our understanding of the platform's unique dynamics within the digital sex work landscape. Subsequently, the presentation of empirical findings will be divided into three distinct sections. The first section aims to offer an overview of the diverse backgrounds of research participants, along with their various motivations for joining the digital sex industry. Additionally, an examination of participants' subjective views on OnlyFans' design and affordances will provide deeper insights into their perspectives on the platform's operational aspects. The following sections will proceed with a comparative analysis, delineating the

distinct features of adult content creation on OnlyFans in contrast to other forms of digital sex work, such as streaming on webcam platforms. This comparison will not only underscore the platform's innovative approach to monetizing social relationships but also highlight the ways in which it redefines user engagement and interactivity in the realm of digital adult entertainment.

Literature review

The rise of OnlyFans has contributed to reconfiguring digital sexual commerce, producing a multifaceted landscape shaped by opaque gig-economy dynamics, ubiquitous self-branding (Hearn, 2010), and a complex interplay between work, leisure, and intimacy. While the platform has been the subject of a growing body of scholarly discussion, despite a few exceptions (Cardoso & Scarcelli, 2020; Hamilton et al., 2022; Rouse & Salter, 2021; Easterbrook-Smith, 2022; Lippmann et al., 2023), current works on OnlyFans tend to be theoretical (Bonifacio and Wohn 2020; Jarrett, 2022) or concentrated on collective imaginaries surrounding the platform (Van der Nagel, 2021). Thereby, there is still a gap in understanding the lived experiences of OnlyFans creators. This section will briefly revise the existing scholarship on the platform to provide a context for the present discussion.

Bonifacio and Wohn (2020) employ OnlyFans as an example to build their original definition of the emerging model of digital patronage platforms, namely socio-technical systems characterized by financial transactions between individual users in support of creative expression, while the platform provides the necessary technological and financial infrastructure to facilitate the exchange (Bonifacio & Wohn, 2020). The authors identify in a feature called 'pay-per-view' (involving additional fees for access to specific content and one-on-one interactions) the main element that distinguishes OnlyFans from other digital patronage platforms (Bonifacio & Wohn, 2020: 223).

Jarrett's (2022) work delves into the commodification and self-branding aspects of the online creator economy, emphasizing the relational labor involved in managing quasi-interpersonal relationships between creators and fans, and the investment in growing subjective human capital on workers' side. To challenge the alienation inherent in the concept of commodification, conventionally adopted to frame sexual labor, the author proposes the concept of 'assetization' to highlight creators' agency in shaping their brand and value, hence establishing workers' agency at the centre of the labor process.

Van der Nagel's (2021) paper discusses the impact of competing platform imaginaries of NSFW content creation on OnlyFans, providing insights into the different representations and perceptions of the platform promoted by mainstream media, OnlyFans' official communications, and the wider internet public, and highlighting the stigmatization of NSFW content creation despite the widespread consensus associating the platform with amateur pornography. Furthermore, the study contributes to an understanding of OnlyFans' distinctive socio-technical environment by examining the platform's opaque ranking system, which, expressed in percentages and determined by a combination of creator revenue, subscribers, online presence, and undisclosed factors, directly influences creators' subscription prices, relationships, and potential collaborations (Van der Nagel, 2021).

Zelizer's (2005) exploration of the evolving social meanings of money and economic transactions provides a framework to understand how monetary transactions intertwine with intimate social relations, a phenomenon evident in the operations of OnlyFans. This perspective challenges traditional dichotomies between money and intimacy, offering insights into the unique economic and social interactions facilitated by the platform.

Swartz's (2020) conceptualization of digital payment mechanisms and transactional identities and communities furthers this understanding, highlighting how financial transactions on platforms like OnlyFans have become integral to social interactions. This theory provides a lens to examine the complex dynamics of creator-consumer relationships in the digital sex work landscape.

Moving on to empirical studies of workers' experiences, Cardoso and Scarcelli's (2021) study focuses on the experiences of individuals engaged in sexualized work on OnlyFans, shedding light on the impact of platformed work and the gig economy on their daily lives, the dynamics of self-branding, and the manipulation of bodily self-presentation. Research by Hamilton and colleagues (2022) explores the multiple motivations for creating content on OnlyFans, highlighting both the opportunities for improved working conditions and increased autonomy, as well as the challenges faced, including stigma, censorship, and surveillance. Easterbrook-Smith (2022) highlights the interplay between precarity and stigma in OnlyFans' gig-economy work, emphasizing the control and financial rewards retained by creators while acknowledging the expansion of online sex work during the pandemic.

Moreover, in her comprehensive study of pornography work, Berg (2021) points to the widespread use of OnlyFans by porn workers involved in mainstream productions (while this environment is conventionally associated with amateurism) as a strategy to supplement their income, demonstrating the centrality of self-branding (Hearn, 2010) in coping with the inherent precarity of the pornography industry. In addition, research by Lippmann and colleagues (2023) explores users' perspectives on knowledge and skills acquired on the platform, highlighting the transformative impact of increased internet access and innovative technologies on sexual navigation and learning. Finally, Rouse and Salter's (2021) work emphasizes the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on fan spaces and the work of fan producers, particularly in relation to gendered 'fantrepreneurs' and the disruption of media industry profit models.

While existing studies provide valuable insights on specific aspects of adult content creation, a comprehensive analysis which systematically investigates experiences of OnlyFans creators in the broader context of digital adult entertainment, through comparisons with alternative forms of digital sex work, is still lacking. This study aims to address this gap through in-depth ethnographic investigations into the lived experiences of OnlyFans creators and other kinds of digital sex workers.

Overview of participants' backgrounds and motivations to join the platformised sex industry

As underscored in recent scholarship on digital sex work (Sanders et al., 2018), this sector has emerged as an alternative for in-person sex workers looking to transition their services online, driven by the prospect of increased earnings and enhanced personal safety. The impetus to shift online was further amplified by the limitations on social interactions imposed by the COVID-19 outbreak (Rouse and Salter, 2021). The appeal of substantial earning potential and a perceived sense of safety has, in turn, attracted a diverse array of newcomers with varying backgrounds, many of whom are concurrently engaged in other occupations.

The sample of workers involved in this research mirrors this heterogeneity. Despite this diversity, certain recurring patterns have emerged. Many participants have previous or current experiences in service-oriented roles (13) or creative sectors (8), encompassing both cultural (e.g., marketing, copywriting) and artistic domains (e.g., dancing, modelling). Additionally, a significant number are presently enrolled in, or have recently completed, secondary education (13). A few (4) have transitioned from various forms of in-person erotic labor, involving diverse degrees of bodily contact

such as escorting, professional domination, or stripping. Several participants (20) have maintained their primary employment, suggesting a perception of the field as inherent precarious which seems to challenge the empowering narratives of effortless success on OnlyFans perpetuated by media representations (Hamilton et al., 2022).

The table below offers an overview of participants' demographic characteristics, the platforms where they provide sexual services, current additional employments (if any), and professional backgrounds. Notably, a substantial number of participants commenced their engagement with digital sex work immediately after completing their education.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Nationality	Platform sex work	Current other occupation	Prior employment
Litz	F	36	American	OnlyFans	Secretary	Same as current
Kat	F	34	American	My Free Cams	None	Restaurant manager (stopped because of covid)
Cherry	F	30	American	OnlyFans; Chaturbate	Game designer; Independent porn performer and producer	College student
Patrick	M	35	American	OnlyFans; Cam4	Writer; Bartender	Same as current
Andrea	F	32	British	OnlyFans	Professional dominatrix	Same as current
Lissandro	M	28	British	OnlyFans; Pornhub; Webcamming via Telegram;	Dancer; Masseur	College student
Peach	F	24	Danish	Chaturbate; Seeking	Professional dominatrix; College student	Same as current
Rose	F	31	French	OnlyFans; Seeking	Pole dance instructor; Escort	Stripper (stopped because of covid)
Eugenie	F	25	French	OnlyFans	Copywriter	College student

Stella	F	22	Italian	OnlyFans; Chaturbate; Stripchat; Bongacams; Webcamming via Telegram	Hairdresser	Stripper (stopped because of covid)
Cindy	F	21	Italian	OnlyFans	Social media influencer; Art student	College student
Margot	F	22	Italian	OnlyFans	Bartender & College student	Same as current
Valeria	F	21	Italian	OnlyFans	College student	Same as current
Lily	F	31	Italian	OnlyFans	Professional dancer; Personal trainer	Same as current
Beatrice	F	24	Italian	OnlyFans; Pornhub	None	College student
Lavinia	F	40	Italian	Cam4	Social worker; Alternative porn producer	Same as current
Ursula	F	27	Italian	OnlyFans; Pornhub; Cam4	Store owner	College student
Christian	M	29	Italian	OnlyFans; Pornhub	Store owner	College student
Fabrizio	M	36	Italian	OnlyFans; MYM; Cam4	Office worker	Same as current
Mattia	M	47	Italian	OnlyFans; MYM; Fansly	Photographer	Same as current
Alex	M	23	Italian	OnlyFans	Professional entertainer	Secondary school
Clotilde	F		Italian	OnlyFans; Pornhub	None	College student
Venere	F	22	Italian	OnlyFans	None	Waitress
Ricky	M	33	American	OnlyFans	None	Nightlife promoter; Reality show participant
Dimitri	M	32	Italian	Cam4	College student; Private tutor	Cashier; Librarian; College student
Angela	F	25	Italian	OnlyFans	None	Waitress
Martic	F	19	Italian	OnlyFans	Secondary school student	Same as current

Serena	F	20	Italian	OnlyFans; Chaturbate	None	Shop assistant
Carla	F	49	Italian	Cam4; Pornhub	In-person sex worker	Porn performer
Eleanor	F	32	Ukrainian	OnlyFans	None	Waitress
Rebecca	F	36	French	OnlyFans	Professional dancer & instructor; Professional model	Same as current
Rita	F	37	Italian	OnlyFans	Graphic designer	Same as current
Allison	F	31	Canadian	OnlyFans	College Student; Youtube Streamer	Adult webcam model
Karen	F	30	Canadian	OnlyFans; MyFreeCams	None	College student
Jacob	M	29	British	OnlyFans	None	Waiter

Table 2: Overview of participants' demographic information and backgrounds

Participants' motivations for entering the sex industry are diverse, encompassing several thematic areas. Many were compelled by financial needs arising from job losses during the COVID-19 outbreak. Individuals who had previously worked in service sectors found the allure of greater earning potential and organizational flexibility in digital sex work particularly appealing. For some, this transition prompted a permanent departure from their previous occupations, especially those in the food industry who valued the flexibility over fixed shifts. On the other hand, individuals engaged in creative industries, like Rita, who works as a freelance graphic designer for marketing agencies, chose to continue their primary employment while incorporating digital sex work as a supplementary activity. What stands out is the participants' emphasis on the consistency between their primary occupations and content creation in the digital sex industry. Many interestingly highlighted the application of specific skills from their main jobs to enhance their careers in digital sex work. The recurring mention of this connection underscores the professionalism increasingly associated with a successful OnlyFans career. While the correlation between professional expertise in marketing and fame on OnlyFans is not surprising given the platform's implicit requirement for constant self-promotion, the participants' consistent emphasis on this connection is indicative of a shifting representation of sexual labor as a qualified job requiring a distinct set of skills.

Others were similarly motivated by economic considerations, opting for digital sex work as their first foray into the job market. Their goals ranged from accumulating savings for college fees to gaining independence from family support. Notably, a common thread among this group was their

initiation into digital sexual commerce during secondary education. These participants often linked their initial exploration of digital intimacies to a desire for sexual knowledge, previously restricted by strict upbringings, often rooted in a Catholic background. Additionally, many participants in this category vividly recalled facing bullying during their time in school, often due to particular bodily features or aesthetic styles. For them, posting explicit pictures online became a means to foster a more positive relationship with their bodies, transforming what began as a playful activity and an escape from closed-minded environments into a professional pursuit as they recognized the earning potential. These individuals entered the realm of paid intimacy informally, selling intimate pictures via platforms like Instagram and PayPal or providing paid video calls through Skype and Telegram. Notably, participants who initiated sex work while underage (a sensitive issue that will not be directly referenced here, even pseudonymously, to ensure privacy) recalled charging higher prices during this stage, recognizing the unique economic value associated with their youth.

Clotilde is an Italian undergraduate student of Communication. Among the participants who entered the labor market primarily through the creation of adult content, her case stands out for its pragmatic consideration of long-term career prospects and for the way she views her aspiring career as a sex worker as a consequence of her inner drive towards the sexual realm. In her own words:

I mean, if my passion lies within the realm of sexuality, I could have become a sexologist or an activist. However, you know what didn't appeal to me about these options? I didn't like the pay, the working hours, and the field of study involved. So, I found out about this alternative field and dove into it. I'll continue doing it as long as I enjoy it, and as long as I feel fully compensated for this work. I would certainly appreciate it if it also took an activist turn, like advocating for the rights of workers in this industry. Also, as I mentioned earlier, I would like to create traineeships for this line of work. Something similar to those online courses available now online, like 'Start your e-commerce,' 'How to become an aesthetician' or 'How to become a painter.' Just like all the video courses you find online, perhaps even create a video course about this topic.

The participant's broad interest in digital sexual commerce is evidenced by her choice to focus her undergraduate dissertation on this topic. Her desire to move smoothly from direct sexual labor to activism for sex work rights and ad hoc training for creators suggests an imaginary of sexual labor that does not constrain other professional opportunities, in contrast to the emphasis on the risk of contextual collapse in previous literature on digital sex work (Campbell et al., 2019). Her reflections reveal a palpable self-entrepreneurial approach, portraying digital sex work not as a survival strategy

but as a convenient opportunity for an enjoyable work-life balance. The earning prospects and organizational freedom typically associated with this sector contribute to this perspective. Viewing sex work rationally as a potential professional option among others aligns with the mainstreaming of sex work catalysed by platforms like OnlyFans, as discussed in the literature (Hamilton et al., 2022). Moreover, Clotilde's suggestion that her initial engagement with the sex industry could pave the way for building her own business as a trainer for newcomers illustrates the progressive professionalization of this field. It underscores the perception that specific skills are essential, encouraging potential newcomers to enrol in paid courses. The emergence of commonly named 'OnlyFans academies' advertised on social media, offering specialized online classes for varying fees, further reflects this trend.⁷

⁷ Some examples:

<https://ofacademy.it/> [Last accessed on 8/12/2023]

This set of online classes for prospective adult content creators is run by two currently active OnlyFans workers. Simultaneously managing their independent explicit profiles, they employ narratives of incredible success achievable if one knows the tricks of the trade, providing advice to newcomers for considerable fees. The prices of classes range from 297€ to 1397€, with a checkout page for card payments on their website and the option of installment payments, suggesting processes of increasing institutionalization and infrastructural integration, testified by creators' and dependency on a broad ecosystem of interrelated platforms, including payment companies. Interestingly, these classes cover various aspects of the work beyond sexual performance, such as how to deal with technical glitches or fiscal and legal aspects. However, most attention is always dedicated to strategies for social media self-promotion, further demonstrating the centrality of self-branding in the work of adult content creators.

<https://camgirlsurvivalguide.tumblr.com/> [Last accessed on 8/12/2023]

This Tumblr blog is managed by a well-known and experienced content creator who engaged in webcamming for many years (explaining the blog's title, initially focused on webcam work). A few years ago, she shifted her adult activities exclusively to Onlyfans. Notably, this informational project spans several platforms, including an Onlyfans free profile, a YouTube channel, and Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter profiles, which the creator also uses for promotional purposes. This dynamic illustrates the effective embeddedness of her digital persona in the platforms' ecology, granting her visibility and thus a loyal fanbase.

The participant contributed to the project with an interview and agreed to the use of this material.

As previously mentioned, some participants had enduring experience posting intimate content online driven by a genuine desire for sexual discovery. When they first learned about OnlyFans through word of mouth or the social media hype during the pandemic, they launched profiles to either monetize their existing material or find an environment without content moderation, ensuring their content wouldn't be censored. In some cases, the process aimed to meet popular demands from their social media audience, as explained by Valeria, an Italian creator in her early twenties who used to post erotic material on her Instagram page for leisure, but discovered the potential for monetisation through interaction with her social media followers, further testifying to the complex merging of sex work platforms and social media platforms resulting from the popularity of Onlyfans:

So, I started last year - I had my Instagram profile, like everyone else, where you post photos with friends, etc. [...] Then I began posting some photos that were a bit... I mean, where I started to adopt somewhat provocative poses, you know? From there, it quickly grew, I gained followers, and started selling a few things through Instagram, and stuff like that. I didn't have OnlyFans at that point, but I already had people frequently asking me, 'Why don't you open an OnlyFans? You'd be successful,' things like that. So, after so many people recommended it, I thought, 'Well, why shouldn't I give it a try?' .

Beatrice, another well-known Italian creator who collaborates with her husband, describes the increasing professionalization of what essentially started as a hobby:

We actually started with a forum, and then with a website, publishing content that was essentially artistic nudes, solely for pure enjoyment, very spontaneously, every once in a while. From there, there was an immediate demand from the audience [...] and one thing led to another; the demand became huge, and we were asked to open Instagram, then to open Twitter [...] and from there, it was an escalation of things, of new content, of desire, especially on my part, to create and to be seen, given all the enthusiasm from the audience; so, eventually, launching an OnlyFans felt simply natural.

Beatrice's way of framing her activity as driven solely by the pleasure of producing content and meeting the expectations of the audience, to the exclusion of earning prospects, cannot be understood without considering the participant's privileged socio-economic context. Married at 19 to an older

wealthy entrepreneur, she left university and did not look for work in order to devote all her energy to the marriage. Her affluent lifestyle is evidenced by the luxurious consumption practices displayed in her content (i.e. filming in exclusive locations, sophisticated holiday destinations, high fashion clothing, etc.). Therefore, while narratives of genuine commitment as a motivating factor over economic considerations are common among Onlyfans creators, Beatrice's account should be taken with a grain of salt.

In Valeria's and Beatrice's accounts, a rhetoric similar to that of celebrity emerges, in the sense of showcasing oneself to satisfy the audience's desires. In a way, the opening of OnlyFans is conceived as relational labor (Baym, 2015), allowing creators to maintain a consistent relationship with loyal followers interested in regular content - something challenged by content moderation on social media, which tends to ban explicit posts or entire profiles. It is noteworthy that among self-defined amateurs joining OnlyFans to fulfil their sexual curiosities, most male participants overlooked economic interests. They framed the benefit of having an OnlyFans profile mainly in relation to the possibility of accessing a wider range of sexual partners through collaboration among creators⁸.

A small group of participants related their entry into the sex industry as a rational strategy to achieve the organisational freedom they needed to effectively fulfil their parental responsibilities, in line with the findings of Jones (2015) in relation to webcam work. In this context, digital sex work, particularly on platforms such as OnlyFans, emerged as an attractive avenue for individuals seeking flexibility in working hours and location. This perspective highlights a shift in motivations for entering the sex industry, emphasising not only economic considerations but also a desire for greater control over one's schedule to accommodate parental responsibilities.

For those with previous experience with other sectors of the sex industry, such as offline escorting or mainstream pornography, the shift to adult content creation was experienced as strongly empowering. Ricky is a 32-year-old American adult content creator who first started his career in the sex industry offline. His account of the shift to digital sex work enthusiastically emphasizes the

⁸ The limited gender diversity in the sample substantially constrains the generalizability of this finding. Further studies would definitely benefit from a systematic comparison of the work experiences of different gender groups to assess whether gender differences affect workers' perceptions of professionalization.

freedom granted to independent content creators, representing the digitalization of sex work as a complete revolution of the field.

I think I'm [pause] obviously, I'm in a very privileged position to do it [sex work] because I am afforded almost complete freedom to do what I want, with whom I want when I want. And I can just reject the things I don't want to do. I think that's the best part of it. I think that's something completely unique, this new era of independent content creators as far as sex work goes. But like, you know, if it was like a few years ago, - before OnlyFans, when I was, like, in the height of my [pause] slut era where I was just doing this stuff in-person - like, you know, I would never do it again.

The stark language employed to characterize his prior in-person services as 'my slut era', juxtaposes with the more impartial label of 'independent content creators'. This contrast not only suggests a disparaging view of the latter but also conveys an inherent hierarchical distinction between the two categories. This sentiment aligns with the conclusions drawn from sociological research that characterizes digital sex work as more financially rewarding, secure, and satisfying compared to its in-person counterpart (Sanders et al., 2019). Nevertheless, it's worth noting that the interviewee subsequently conveys a more nuanced viewpoint.

And the only thing that I don't like about it, it's the stigma and how it will follow you. [...] There's obviously more danger in in-person sex work, like full-service in-call... You know what I mean? Sex work is that you do have to deal with potentially scary or dangerous strangers who have an inherent sort of power on you, you know, the fucking carrot on a stick, like: "Hey, you want this money? You have to do what I say and make me happy and whatever". And you don't have many protections because you're doing something illegal already, you know? Um, but there's no footprint, you know what I mean? You can just go in, do it for a few years, get out, or just do it for however long you want, and no one has to know; you can be completely stealth, or stealth as you can possibly be, and there's no footprint and you can get in and out. Hopefully, you know, if everything goes fine. But then [online], you know, with more safety also comes more exposure and more visibility: because you, again, you have the safety of choosing whom you want to work with; but then, it's out there, and even if you do it for a short period... You know, no matter if you start winning, or you fail, like you don't make any money at all, right? People will remember [emphasis] and somewhat it's even more embarrassing that you only did it for like a week. You know what I mean? It's like this, Internet, the gifting curse that is the Internet, you know.

The distinction between in-person and platform-based sex work is articulated as a perceived trade-off between the immediate risks of physical harm and the potential long-term reputational harm. In the context of in-person sex work, the vulnerability to physical harm is acknowledged due to the inherent nature of face-to-face encounters with strangers. Additionally, the lack of autonomy in selecting partners and the transactional nature of agreements create an asymmetrical power dynamic with clients which constrains workers' ability to negotiate boundaries. However, the discreet nature of this form of sex work⁹ provides an advantage, as it leaves no discernible trace and offers the possibility of discontinuation without lasting repercussions. Conversely, platformized sex work is associated with advantages in terms of physical safety and agency. Engaging with clients through digital platforms affords workers the freedom to choose partners and determine the manner of engagement. Despite these benefits, engaging with adult entertainment platforms is accompanied by increased visibility and, as a consequence, exposure to societal stigma. In the light of the concept of 'whore stigma' (Pheterson, 1990; 1993), it is clear that social disapproval of sexual commerce is not linked to the degree of visibility of the provision of sexual services, but to hostile stereotypes and moral prejudices. Such stigma is embedded in traditional social, cultural and moral norms of sanctioned gendered sexual behaviour. The term 'gifting curse', employed to characterize the Internet, encapsulates the complex and mixed sentiments surrounding the empowering potential of digital labor. On the one hand, it is seen as a liberating force, challenging the historical power dynamics inherent in client-worker relationships within the realm of sex work. However, on the other hand, it raises concerns about the enduring impact on a worker's reputation, which are rooted in the widely recognised principle that online actions leave a sort of footprint which tend to persist indefinitely. While the considerable autonomy enjoyed by digital sex workers remains unparalleled, it is thus important to recognize that certain challenges exist which pose a threat to the assumed safety associated with digitally mediated work (Campbell et al., 2019).

The participant narratives presented above, culminating in the detailed account of Ricky's transition from offline to digital sex work, poignantly illustrate the profound impact of platformization on the sex work industry. Ricky's experience underscores a significant ambivalence inherent in the

⁹ at least for what concerns indoor sex work, as, on the contrary, street-based sex workers face social stigma and discrimination precisely due to their visibility and the association with drug consumption and sexual diseases in the common perception (Armstrong, 2018).

increasing presence of platforms in this field: on one hand, they offer a perception of empowerment, autonomy, and safety to workers; on the other hand, they bring about reputational risks tied to the enduring visibility of their online presence. The accounts from participants indicate that the shift towards digital platforms like OnlyFans may reflect an ongoing process of the mainstreaming of sex work. However, this redefinition of the industry is accompanied by inherent ambivalence, mirroring both the empowering potential and the persistent challenges faced by workers navigating the evolving landscape of platformized sexual labor. It is noteworthy, however, that while individuals like Ricky have transitioned permanently from offline to online work within adult entertainment platforms, other participants (4) continue to engage in both in-person and digitally mediated sexual labor. This suggests that the shift from traditional provision of sexual services to digitally intermediated forms should be understood as a continuum rather than a radical rupture.

The forthcoming section engages in a comparative analysis with alternative forms of digital sex work, specifically examining content accessibility and modes of user interaction, with the goal of unveiling the OnlyFans unique impact in monetizing relationships and fostering transactional identities and communities, thereby highlighting how OnlyFans is reshaping the economic and social dimensions of digital sex work.

The distinctiveness of OnlyFans in the context of adult entertainment platforms

Content accessibility

The design of OnlyFans allows access to the profiles of adult creators¹⁰ only through the direct link, without the possibility of browsing the homepage of the site and without the purchase of a monthly subscription (unless the profile allows a free subscription). In terms of content accessibility, there is thus a clear contrast between the freemium model of webcam platforms and the subscription-based model of OnlyFans. A distinctive feature of OnlyFans is that economic transactions, with prices

¹⁰ Strikingly, the profiles of non-explicit content creators do not have this limitation.

freely set by each creator, serve as a prerequisite for access to content and interaction¹¹. The creator determines the price of the content and what is to be revealed, apparently without any intervention from the platform (such as algorithmic sorting) or other intermediaries.

This aspect, which participants perceive as empowering compared to other forms of sex work, can be interpreted in the light of Zelizer's (2005) theorisations on the social meaning of money. Zelizer (2005) argues that economic transactions and intimate relationships can be, and often are, deeply intertwined, challenging the conventional separation of these spheres. The author rejects conventional dichotomies between money and intimacy by providing eloquent examples of how these spheres often overlap in ways that go unnoticed, or generally without producing the sense of discomfort in social actors that would be expected, as in the case of the material dependency that characterises parent-child relationships. On OnlyFans, this intertwining of money and intimacy is evident as creators control the economic value of their intimate content and interactions, redefining the boundaries between personal intimacy and economic activity, while there is an implicit shared consensus between 'fans' and 'creators' that such economic mediation does not compromise the idealised authenticity of their connection.

In turn, on most webcam platforms, viewers gain free access to chat sessions and then consider compensating sex workers by tipping or requesting access to private pay-per-minute shows. This structure forces sex workers to begin performing for free in order to entice users into paid chats, but with no guarantee that the time spent online, either waiting for clients to show up or providing unpaid entertainment to convert 'lurkers' into paying customers, will result in satisfactory, if any, remuneration. Peach, a Danish webcam model in her late twenties, describes the emotional strain that results from the unpredictable nature of audience engagement. The prospect of potential clients, combined with long periods of minimal interaction, creates a challenge in anticipating the level of energy investment and income that each session might yield.

I thought it was gonna be so easy when I started, and it really was not [laugh]. It has a lot to do with dealing with rejection, you know? Cause sometimes you would go online and there will be

¹¹ Creators who provide free subscriptions to their profiles often restrict access to their content, making it available only through additional payments. This is facilitated by the pay-per-view affordance, first introduced by Onlyfans in the evolving landscape of digital patronage platforms (Bonifacio & Wohn, 2020).

many, many people online that day; but then the next day it's a holiday and everybody is with their family, being social, and you just have to deal with the fact that there is not even one client, that day. So, it was hard to deal with the fluctuating aspect of it. [...] I would make this amount of money in an hour, then sometimes I would make it in eight hours, right? Some hours were crazy and then some hours were super boring.

Peach's struggle exemplifies the emotional strains, financial instability, and unpredictable work hours that result from the fluctuations in the number of viewers that are typical of webcam modelling. The representation of payment transfers from the audience as a 'gift', embedded in the 'freemium' models of webcam platforms, suggests an implicit tendency to deny the economic nature of the interaction between streamers and performers. This contrast in models of content accessibility, as highlighted by Peach's experience, illustrates the complex implications when monetary transactions intertwine with intimate social relations.

OnlyFans' affordances, on the other hand, require a financial commitment for access to intimacy, which is openly accepted by both parties with apparent ease, accepting the monetary aspect of their interactions as a natural and integral part of their connection, challenging traditional views that often see economic transactions within intimate spaces as inherently problematic or inauthentic. This aspect shifts the traditional dynamics observed in digital sex work and offers insights to reflect on how economic activities and intimate relationships can coexist, while mutually shaping and influencing each other.

Furthermore, while the freemium model of webcam platforms defines money flows as 'tips' and users' currency as 'tokens', suggesting the companies' positioning within an idealised playful gift economy, OnlyFans' currency is simply called money, without any allusive linguistic adaptation. It can also be noted that webcam platforms use third party intermediaries to pay their performers (such as bitcoins, blockchain or online payment platforms such as Paxum), a process that often turns out to be complex and time-consuming, requiring further registration, often with identity verification, biometric recognition and other intrusive procedures. OnlyFans, on the other hand, transfers revenues directly to the creators' credit cards, without using intermediaries or requiring any additional procedures from the user. The contrasting 'freemium' model of webcam platforms and the subscription model at the heart of digital patronage (Bonifacio & Wohn, 2020) highlights how different platforms and models within digital sex work navigate the complex terrain of monetising intimacy, each with its own set of social understandings and implications.

Paid interactivity and transactional communities

It has been stressed that, on OnlyFans, creators independently set the subscription price for their profiles, resulting in an economic transaction prior to any interaction or content consumption. Creators are under no obligation to engage in free chats or offer explicit content to subscribers. Although many creators exchange free messages with customers as an engagement strategy to later encourage the purchase of additional paid content or personalized requests, the platform also offers the option to charge for text chats, ranging from \$3 to \$50 per message.

This model of interaction on OnlyFans reflects Swartz's (2020) theory any payment exchanges are to be understood as communicative acts which foster the development of identities and communities that are inherently transactional, that is, where economic interactions are central to the formation and maintenance of social bonds. Creators' ability to monetize not only their content but also interpersonal interactions foster the construction of transactional relationships between creators and their audiences, a process directly encouraged by the platform's affordances. This process demonstrates the unique evaluation of interactivity that characterizes this specific platform's environment.

As anticipated, indeed, one of the most significant aspects that sets OnlyFans apart from other adult entertainment websites is the emphasis on interpersonal relationships, as highlighted by Lissandro, a content creator with previous experience on Pornhub:

Pornhub and OnlyFans are completely different. When I started making videos, Pornhub was similar to YouTube: you uploaded for free and got paid based on the audience watching. It didn't give you the chance to communicate with clients, as that won't offer you anything more. We were receiving messages, but they didn't offer anything to us other than so self-confidence in order to keep shooting. After they changed Pornhub, so you can also sell private videos on here but that's all. OnlyFans pays you to flirt, not just to shoot. For example, I ask users \$20 for 15 minutes of conversation, and if they want additional content, they have to pay separately. Other than the sexual service, the main task is to gain as many clicks as possible, it's a sort of advertisement. In Pornhub things didn't work like that, but OnlyFans looks much more like a society.

The account illustrates the different characteristics of Pornhub and OnlyFans in terms of their monetisation models and the nature of social interactions within each platform. While Pornhub reflects a transactional model where content creation is monetised through views, the participant

characterises OnlyFans as a platform that pays for interaction, describing it as a space where creators are compensated not only for creating content, but also for the act of flirting and engaging with users. The different means of monetisation granted to creators (i.e. monthly subscription, tips, sale of pay-per-view content, paid chats, live shows, etc.), which involve the presence of different transactional mechanisms within the same platform model, can be interpreted as further evidence of the platform's peculiar approach to paid sociality, namely the exacerbation of transactions.

In this sense, OnlyFans is a 'society' (in Lissandro's words) in which the transactional nature of intimacy is legitimized and, hence, naturalised by the implicit social norms of the platform and directly encouraged by the platform's affordances. The analogy of the platform as a 'society' exemplifies the transactional community (Swartz, 2020) emerging through paid intimate interactions, exemplifying the evolving nature of digital payment mechanisms and how this affects the social meanings associated with transactions. In the context of digital adult entertainment, the comparison of Pornhub's and OnlyFans' monetisation models reflects the evolving social meaning of money (Zelizer, 2005) in the platformized sex industry, supporting Swartz's (2020) argument that financial transactions have become integral to social interactions in the contemporary digital environment. Furthermore, the participant's description of their task on OnlyFans as maximizing clicks, seen as a form of social currency, reveals a distinctly advertising-like approach. This supports the portrayal of content creation on OnlyFans as fundamentally self-branding labor (Hearn, 2010), a theme consistently proposed and developed throughout this thesis (Hearn, 2010).

The social construction of value in digital patronage

Paid interaction is therefore at the core of the service offered by content creators on OnlyFans. Another factor that makes communication through direct messaging particularly appealing for users is that the content available through the creators' subscription-based feeds tends to be less explicit (depicting portrays in lingerie or censored nudity) than the pay-per-view offerings. This platform design thus offers the potential to monetise various interactions, marking a departure from the free labor and limited control over self-image inherent in webcam streaming. This element aligns with Jarrett's (2022) theory of assetization, where creators strategically manage their digital assets, including both content and interpersonal interactions.

In this regard, it is worth to note that the predominant monetization strategies employed by creators underwent a notable shift in relation to content accessibility, that I directly observed over the

course of the fieldwork. In 2021, during the period when OnlyFans was still in the process of gaining the recognition it presently enjoys, subscribing to a creator's profile typically granted access to a substantial volume of explicit content. However, in the present landscape, explicit content is predominantly marketed through pay-per-view transactions. A creator's profile dashboard now typically features soft erotic content or self-censored material, such as nudes partially covered by emojis, with the option to unlock the uncensored image through extra payment. Consequently, in the current scenario on OnlyFans, the benefits derived from subscription purchases are primarily confined to the opportunity for direct communication with the creators. This evolution in monetization strategies reflects the changing nature of transactional identities and communities (Swartz, 2020) on the platform.

While this resulted in a widespread media hype about significant monetization opportunities across a wide array of content types (van der Nagel, 2021), the actual experiences of participants indicate that such autonomy is somewhat relative, given the challenge of standing out in a saturated market where social media influencers, mainstream celebrities, sex workers and newcomers to the industry compete with one another for visibility. Cindy, a popular social media influencer whose OnlyFans profile features soft erotic content, cynically challenges the notion that newcomers could achieve visibility without engaging in explicit performances. She argues that only those with an established and stable popularity enjoy relatively complete freedom over their content creation.

[...] it's a saturated market, you have to be ready for people asking for more; for example, no one wants to buy feet anymore because there are too many! You have to be very aware, I mean, you can't just dive into it without an idea, just because you saw a friend doing it or people on TikTok telling you they made 500 euros, because it's not true! You don't make 500 euros selling feet, and I'm very realistic about this. If you start on OnlyFans selling feet, trust me, it doesn't work, and so you have to be ready to push yourself more. So, if you want to do OnlyFans, know that you can't just sell feet – because you can't make a living from feet. Many ask me for advice on OnlyFans, and I'm very realistic; I say, 'With lingerie photos, if you're not Belen Rodriguez, you won't get anywhere; maybe users subscribe, but then they unsubscribe immediately; your goal is to keep them subscribing. So post whatever you want, always, but know that if you don't want to do certain things, you won't be able to make a living. I mean, living off soft stuff on OnlyFans, if you don't have a solid base, like from Instagram or TikTok, you can't do it.' Because people subscribe to things like that, blindly, only if they know you from somewhere else and want to see what you post on OnlyFans. It's curiosity, right? It's the fact that they know you; but if you're a girl no one knows,

and you have to convince people to buy your content without them knowing you, you have to post things that aren't lingerie photos with your dog. Definitely not feet, because there are too many feet. Enough, can't take it anymore [laughs].

As Cindy explains, given that OnlyFans has become a saturated and competitive environment, providing allegedly substandard content or setting prices significantly higher than the average within one's ranking tier can lead to follower disengagement. Cindy's perspective on the saturated market of OnlyFans highlights the inherent competition in the dynamics of assetization, as outlined by Jarrett (2022). This perspective subtly contests Jarrett's emphasis on the increased agency accompanying the shift from commodification to assetization. In the competitive landscape of OnlyFans, creators face the continuous challenge of adapting and effectively marketing their digital assets to stand out in a crowded market. As a result, highly popular creators who earn significant revenues and therefore occupy higher ranking tiers are able to set higher prices and charge for each piece of content and interaction in addition to the subscription. Meanwhile, newcomers are compelled to propose lower prices in a bid to attract subscribers.

The implicit social norms of the platform imply that the subscription price of a certain account mainly depends on that creator's positioning in the platform's opaque ranking system, but also meant to be consistent with the creators' constructed digital persona and their perceived audience's expectations, as Eugenie, a French creator in her mid-twenties, clarifies:

I started with 10 followers who were very loyal; [...] so yeah, I had a little community, but very loyal followers who were very excited about my content. And I let it [the subscription price] 10 \$ all long, because I think it's [perceived] psychologically [as a] good price but not too cheap. It was not in my mind to make luxurious stuff or something like that: my identity is more like the girl next door, so it was very logical to me to don't have too cheap price, but something very affordable for my community.

In this context, the subscription price serves as a crucial tool for impression management (Goffman, 1959), which not only reflects imagined audience expectations, but actively helps to shape them. Creators like Eugenie use pricing strategically as part of their broader efforts to develop a specific digital identity and foster a sense of community among their followers. Eugenie chooses a price point deliberately set to complement her 'girl next door' persona, illustrating the deep interconnection on OnlyFans between economic choices and the social construction of a specific transactional identity (Swartz, 2020), defined as neither 'cheap' nor 'luxurious'. Her pricing strategy,

in turn, contributes in cultivating a transactional community (Swartz, 2020) that shares this same conception of value.

In this respect, creators tend to choose between two main strategies: offering a freely accessible profile to then sell each content through the pay-per-view function or setting a subscription price through which users gain access to content available in the newsfeed of the account. This initial choice can be crucial in determining visibility and, consequently, a creator's prospects for success. Some creators, however, strategically choose both options, significantly offering different benefits to paid and unpaid subscribers, as the next example shows.

Coniglietta sexy per pasquetta. 😊
Ho mandato in chat questa foto gratis a tutti i miei iscritti, insieme
ad altre molto molto più esplicite. <https://onlyfans.com/██████████>
Ti dico solo che c'è un dildo di vetro e la mia figa aperta in primo
piano. 🍑💕
Se vuoi solo acquistare il set di foto (8) esplicite puoi comprarlo sul
mio profilo free di onlyfans a 10\$
<https://onlyfans.com/██████████> free
ma anche su telegram a 25€
Scrivimi qui 📧
<https://t.me/██████████>
🔥 16 ❤️ 9 👍 4
👁️ 4809 Peachmess, 09:45

Figure 4: Price differentiation for subscribers and non-subscribers undertaken by an OnlyFans content creator. See the translation in foot note.¹²

¹² "Sexy bunny for Easter Monday. 😊 I sent this photo for free in the chat to all my subscribers, along with others that are much more explicit. <https://onlyfans.com/██████████> I'll just tell you that there's a glass dildo and a close-up of my open pussy 🍑💕🍑🍑"

If you just want to buy the set of explicit photos (8), you can purchase it on my free Onlyfans profile for 10\$

<https://onlyfans.com/██████████> free

or on Telegram for 25€ Write to me here 📧"

The participant, an mid-twenties Italian creator named Angela, has agreed to the use of this material.

In this context, price differentiation becomes a key factor in delineating the creator's transactional community (Swartz, 2020). Paid subscribers, as community members, enjoy exclusive benefits that are not accessible to non-paying users. With respect to the prices of services, the reasoning behind is rather nuanced and intimately situated in user interactions, as Serena's account poignantly exemplifies:

You gotta know how to sell yourself, you gotta talk to people. I mean, you gotta approach it as if you have a store, in my opinion, and you're the store manager, you gotta see it like that, you gotta see yourself as a product - it's weird to say, I mean, I know I'm a person, but on OnlyFans, you gotta see yourself a bit like a product. Even regarding discounts, and prices in general, you gotta know how to talk to people, and you gotta know how to get into people's psychology a bit. Let me give you an example: I usually charge a 10-minute video of me masturbating for \$50. Not for everyone, though, because maybe \$50 is too much for some, so maybe I'll say to them, 'Look, just for you, this time, I'll put it at \$40,' and they're happy, and next time, they'll buy it for \$50. And there's the kind of client who, if you charge a video for \$50, thinks it's low-quality content, so you gotta hit him with a higher price, and he thinks, 'Maybe it's worth buying at that price,' but the video is exactly the same. [...] So, you gotta see who you're dealing with, you gotta understand who's in front of you. It's more like a market than a store, that dynamic, it's more like a market.

The interview quote illustrates Serena's perspective on the process of assetization inherent in professional uses of OnlyFans, aligning with the theoretical framework presented in Jarrett's (2022) article on the transformations of the online creator economy. Indeed, the participant strategically manages her digital assets (content) by adapting pricing strategies based on the imagined expectations of individual customers. The participant emphasizes the need to see oneself as a product, albeit admitting a certain uneasiness in such a representation of the self, and to navigate the dynamics of pricing in a distinctly relational way, intrinsically situated in interactions with customers. Remarkably, while her initial reflections suggest a representation of the work of adult content creators as akin to that of a retail manager (thus reflecting the entrepreneurialism typically characterizing the work ethos of content creators), this metaphor underscores the centrality of emotional labor (Hochschild, 1979). The dynamics of negotiation in the context of a market are intimately based on emotional management. Moreover, the inherent unpredictability of bargaining brings back the established analogy of sex work as 'hustling' (Van Doorn & Velthuis, 2018), revealing an underlying dimension of precarity that often remains hidden in participants' self-reports. Although there is wide consensus that the value of 'assets' in the platform environment is socially constructed through

interactions, and as exemplified in Serena's account, largely depends on creators' ability in negotiating with users, workers are also well aware of the unavoidable constraints posed by a competitive market, as Cindy's account demonstrated earlier.

This examination of the implications of OnlyFans' distinctiveness in terms of content accessibility and pricing, framed through an interpretation of ethnographic findings and drawing on the perspectives of Zelizer (2005), Swartz (2020), and Jarrett (2022), reveals a paradigm shift in the digital sex work domain. The platform has reconfigured the role of paid social interactions, embedding economic transactions deeply within the fabric of social relationships.

It has been argued that OnlyFans has reshaped the economic dimension of social interaction in digital sex work by overtly representing user engagement as a valuable commodity, without attempting to overlook the transactional nature of user interactions, as most webcam platforms seek to do through their emphasis on the availability of 'free' shows and the use of vague terms to refer to monetary exchanges. Central to this process is the explicit economic valorisation of social interactions to the extent that they become monetisable assets.

The different means of monetisation granted to creators (i.e. monthly subscription, tips, sale of pay-per-view content, paid chats, live shows, etc.), which involve the presence of different transactional mechanisms within the same platform model, can be interpreted as further evidence of the platform's peculiar approach to paid sociality, namely the exacerbation of transactions. Indeed, on OnlyFans, different degrees of interactivity are invested with different economic values, depending on the popularity (or reputation) of the creators and their ability to market themselves by skilfully navigating the specific expectations of their audience. The platform's unique ability to convert every instance of user interaction into a monetisable asset represents a re-socialisation of transactional relationships. In other words, it legitimises the economic dimension of social relations, which in this context are socially constructed through user interactions shaped by the platform's socio-technical infrastructures.

In addition, it can be claimed that the fact that OnlyFans essentially presents itself as a paid social media platform reflects the process identified by Swartz (2020), according to which payment is becoming increasingly embedded in social media environments. This integration further exemplifies the platform's unique positioning in the digital landscape, where the monetization of social

interaction is not merely an add-on but a fundamental aspect of its functionality and appeal. As a consequence, user interaction with OnlyFans environments produces what Swartz (2020) has conceptualized as transactional identities and communities. In crafting and navigating their digital personas, creators' identity construction within the platform is closely intertwined with their economic value (i.e. prices of subscription and services). Simultaneously, the platform fosters transactional communities (Swartz, 2020), where the dynamics of community engagement and belonging are intimately tied to economic exchanges.

The narratives of participants reveal the practical embodiment of this shift. Their approaches to managing content and engaging audiences represent a distinctive fusion of economic activity and social engagement. This fusion is indicative of a broader trend in digital sex work, where the lines between social interaction and economic gain are not just blurred but effectively merged. The process of building transactional communities and identities on OnlyFans is evident in how creators adapt their pricing strategies based on customer interactions. The participants' strategic approaches to pricing reflect a keen understanding of their audience, an essential aspect of maintaining their transactional identities and the communities that support them.

So far, the discussion has explored the transactional relationships between creators and 'fans' that are fostered by the affordances of OnlyFans. In the platform environment in particular, transactional interactions extend beyond the creator-fan dynamic to include relationships between fellow creators. A common promotional tactic is the reciprocal exchange of 'shoutout posts', where creators promote each other's content to their respective followers. However, the willingness to engage in such exchanges is strongly influenced by each creator's position in the platform's ranking system. Collaborations tend to occur between creators of similar popularity, as promoting a less popular creator can be seen as a reputational risk, while being promoted by someone less popular may not significantly increase follower numbers.

As a result, creators seeking visibility through shoutouts tend to work with peers at a similar ranking level. Newcomers with smaller followings face challenges in gaining visibility through this method. In the absence of other means, they may resort to buying promotions or seeking assistance from more popular creators, often at a negotiated price. This dynamic illustrates that in a platform environment where every interaction can be monetised, even the promotion of fellow creators becomes a monetisable asset or service.

It's worth noting that some creators, lacking resources other than their labor, choose to collaborate with more popular creators for free (i.e. giving up the right to publish the content they produce on their profiles and thus giving up all image rights) in order to gain indirect visibility. They hope that the subscribers of the more popular creator who like the collaborative content will then visit the profile of the less popular creator. In the worst case, such sexual relationships for content production could be seen as a form of sexual exploitation; in the best case, as aspirational work, given the uncertainty of achieving greater visibility or subscriber growth.

Conclusion

Through an extensive exploration grounded on ethnographic data, this chapter has attempted to establish the digital patronage platform OnlyFans as a unique case in the digital sex work landscape, characterised by ambivalent dynamics of mainstreaming sex work and a re-socialisation of economic interactions. The discussion highlighted how OnlyFans has reconfigured the traditional dynamics of digital sex work by integrating economic transactions with social interactions. As a result, the platform fosters transactional communities and identities, emphasising the centrality of interpersonal interactions as monetizable assets. This shift, evident in creators' strategic content management and pricing, is consistent with the shift to a digital economy in which social dynamics are inextricably linked to economic activities. The ethnographic insights into the creators' experiences fully illuminate this shift, revealing a nuanced interplay between self-branding, audience engagement, and entrepreneurial challenges in a saturated market. The chapter concludes that OnlyFans' model of a paid social media structure is driving a process of mainstreaming and re-socialisation of sex work, redefining the boundaries of economic and social spheres in the sector by placing paid interactivity at the heart of this emerging form of digital labor. Crucially, these dynamics do not only inform the relationship between workers and clients but also among fellow workers. The above-mentioned practice of shoutout exchanges, governed by the platform's ranking system, emphasizes the complex interplay of collaboration and competition among creators. This adds another layer to the understanding of how OnlyFans re-socializes economic processes, demonstrates the platform's unique ecosystem also redefines creator interactions, posing concerning questions for the future of workers' solidarity in the digital adult entertainment industry.

Chapter 4. Affordance-driven cross-platform dependency. Self-branding labor of OnlyFans creators across hostile media ecosystems

Introduction

A distinctive feature of OnlyFans, as opposed to other popular digital platforms, is its absence of an algorithmic recommendation system. Creators' profiles can only be accessed through a direct link. As a result, the key asset for creators is their pre-existing popularity, which they aim to monetize. Consequently, creators employ two primary strategies to attract subscribers: shoutout exchanges with fellow creators and social media promotion. As explained in the preceding chapter, the use of shoutout posts hinges on a creator's purchasing power which is determined either by their popularity or willingness to invest money to obtain a visibility boost from more successful creators. Consequently, self-promotion through social media emerges as the most prevalent strategy for building a fanbase, fundamentally transforming sex work into a labor of self-branding, which represents a “form of affective, immaterial labor purposefully undertaken by individuals in order to garner attention, reputation, and, potentially, profit” (Hearn, 2010: 427). The self-branding has been conceptualized as a form of aspirational labor (Duffy, 2016), that is, the creation of cultural content on one's own time and money in the hopes that, eventually, it will lead to recognition and remuneration (Duffy, 2016: 443). This concept well represents the promotional experience of OnlyFans creators because their activities are conducted with uncertainty about their economic outcomes.

To attain visibility on OnlyFans, creators must maintain active profiles on various social media platforms. The production and distribution of content on social media, with the aim of turning followers into paying subscribers, is what constitutes the self-branding labor of OnlyFans creators. This necessitates adapting their content to align with the expectations and specific vernaculars

(Simatzkin-Ohana & Frosh, 2022; Oh, 2020) of the different social media platforms they utilize, while also grappling with the challenges presented by content moderation. Crucially, content moderation policies vary not only across different platforms but also often change abruptly over time. Indeed, the changes in policies due to FOSTA-SESTA laws have virtually turned social media into hostile environments for sex workers (Spisak et al., 2021; Tiidenberg & Van der Nagel, 2020; Walman, 2021; Blunt & Wolf, 2020).

Given the importance of self-branding for OnlyFans workers, who need to successfully navigate precarious digital environments to prevent a sudden end of their careers, this chapter seeks to delve into this dimension of the work of adult content creators by addressing the following research question:

What are the self-branding strategies of OnlyFans creators across social media platforms?

Given the broad scope of this overarching research question, the issue will be investigated by focusing on the following related sub-questions, which tackle different dimensions of the scrutinized phenomenon:

Which social media platforms do OnlyFans creators use, and why?

What challenges emerge from the use of social media for (promoting) sex work?

How do OnlyFans creators navigate the tension between promoting their content and the restriction posed by content moderation policies?

What are the imaginaries, and practices, associated by these workers to different social media platforms in relation to their distinctive affordances, content moderation policies, and perceived audience expectations?

In adapting to, and exploiting, the specific affordances of various social media, do OnlyFans creators adopt thematic and stylistic consistency among different platforms, or they rather develop a platform specific self-brand (borrowing the concept developed by Scolere and colleagues, 2018)?

Answering these questions, it will be introduced the concept of affordance-driven cross-platform dependency, to stress the fact that sexual creators cannot rely solely on OnlyFans, which is the

platform they are engaged with to extract an income. On the contrary, and precisely because of the platform design and the impossibility to have success without a pre-existing fanbase, they have to promote themselves on other platforms, such as mainstream social media, and drive followers to OnlyFans through an often intricate path. This leads to the conclusion that this kind of digital sexual workers is inevitably dependent on different platforms, both the one they earn money from and the ones they have to marketize themselves on. And that, regarding the digital sex work market, these platforms themselves are interdependent.

The discussion will draw on findings emerged from distinctive practices of data collection conducted in various stages of the research. Part of the analysis will rely on insights from interviews with research participants about their social media presence. Extensive excerpts from the interviews will be included to foreground the subjective experiences and perspectives of the participants. While the broader scope of the thesis encompasses a range of digital sex workers, including webcam models, this chapter specifically concentrates on the subsample of OnlyFans creators. This focus is due to the critical role that self-branding plays in their professional experiences, an element that does not seem to be as central to other categories of sex workers.

In addition, it will present first-hand observations gathered throughout the digital ethnographic fieldwork by employing anonymized screenshots from participants' social media profiles prior their explicit consent. Furthermore, this chapter will illustrate the participants' cross-platform connections by presenting a map of their links. This map has been manually developed by tracing the somewhat labyrinthine journey from their social media profiles to their OnlyFans profiles. This approach aligns with Rogers' (2013) digital method paradigm of 'follow the medium, follow the thing,' offering a comprehensive view of their online presence and strategies. The chapter will also include findings from a cross-platform analysis of the Instagram and TikTok profiles of 150 OnlyFans creators.

Combining data from these varied sources is crucial to address the multifaceted aspects of adult content creators' work. The interview data will shed light on participants' perceptions of different platforms and the meanings they attach to their promotional practices. Their accounts will also delve into their experiences with content moderation and the tactics employed to circumvent it. The link map serves as a key tool in understanding the significance of effective cross-platform integration as a strategy to mitigate the risk of deplatformization. Additionally, the analysis of Instagram and TikTok profiles will offer practical insights into the promotional efforts of OnlyFans creators, allowing for the

development of a typology that captures the nuances of their strategies across these closely related yet distinct social media environments.

Literature review

In the evolving digital media landscape, content creator cultures have become a pivotal area of study, particularly with the increasing professionalization of content creation within the platform economy. Cunningham & Craig (2019) explore this transition from a hobby to creative labor, where social media users commercialize and professionalize their online presence. Hearn (2010) describes self-branding as a form of affective, immaterial labor, strategically undertaken to garner attention, reputation, and potentially, profit. This marks a shift from casual user-generated content to goal-oriented performativity, where the brand itself becomes the core asset. The professionalization of content creation has been examined from various angles. Arriagada & Ibáñez (2020) study the transition from blogging to Instagram, emphasizing the need for creators to adapt their self-presentations to specific platform affordances. However, much of this research, including studies by Van Driel & Dumitrica (2021), Ma & Kou (2021, 2022), and Mallari et al. (2021), focuses on individual platforms, offering limited insight into the broader social media ecology. Addressing this limitation, Scolere et al. (2018) and Ma, Gui, & Kou (2023) explore creators' activities across interconnected platforms. Their findings reveal that creators strategically adapt their content and self-presentations to cater to each platform's unique socio-technical environment. This adaptability is crucial for managing audience expectations and maintaining authenticity amidst diverse platform demands.

Content moderation further complicates the content creation landscape. Duffy et al. (2021) and Petre et al. (2019) discuss the precarity stemming from sudden shifts in platform governance and algorithmic visibility. They focus on the effects of algorithmic (in)visibility on social media creators, including strategies to circumvent algorithmic intervention. The challenges of content moderation are particularly acute for adult content creators. Post FOSTA-SESTA, platforms have adopted stricter moderation policies, disproportionately affecting sex workers and other marginalized groups (Duffy & Meisner, 2022; Are & Paasonen, 2021). These policies limit promotional capabilities and raise broader concerns about safety, freedom of expression, and sexual rights (Tiidenberg & van der Nagel, 2020; Paasonen et al., 2019; Spisak et al., 2021). The contrast between mainstream content creators and OnlyFans workers is evident. Unlike mainstream creators who often leverage brand sponsorships,

OnlyFans workers primarily rely on user subscriptions, requiring unique visibility tactics and strategies to navigate content moderation policies targeting sexual content.

While extensive, existing literature on content creators often overlooks the experiences of adult content creators. The strategies and experiences of these creators, operating within a restrictive and stigmatizing digital environment, cannot be fully understood without considering the stringent moderation policies they face. These policies, varying across platforms, directly impact visibility, reach, and engagement. Moreover, apart from few exceptions (Scolere et al., 2018; Ma, Gui, & Kou, 2023), empirical studies typically focus on single platforms, limiting their applicability to the evolving digital landscape of adult content creation. A cross-platform analytical approach is essential to understand the adaptive tactics and complexities faced by adult content creators, especially considering the diverse approaches to content moderation on different platforms.

This chapter aims to address these gaps by exploring the self-branding (Hearn, 2020) practices of adult content creators across various digital platforms. An investigation of their strategies for cross-platform embeddedness, vital for fanbase building, will shed light on the multifaceted strategies creatively developed to circumvent content moderation challenges and maintain visibility.

Affordance-driven cross-platform dependency. Social media ubiquity of OnlyFans content creators

As previously emphasized, the nature of OnlyFans' platform does not allow profile browsing within the website itself. Prospective subscribers primarily access a creator's account via direct links, typically provided on the creator's social media pages using services like Linktree. This characteristic fundamentally transforms the nature of sexual labor within this platform, making it inherently driven by marketing efforts. To capture this phenomenon, I propose the concept of affordance-driven cross-platform dependency. This term encapsulates the idea that OnlyFans' design compels creators to monetize their pre-existing popularity gained on social media, as the platform's features virtually restrict creators from reaching a broader audience through the platform alone. Consequently, individual success in the realm of digital patronage (as discussed by Bonifacio & Wohn, 2020) primarily hinges on one's ability to effectively manage their digital presence across various social media platforms. This aligns with the overarching trends observed in increasingly platform-driven creative industries (as discussed by Scolere et al., 2018, and Gandini, 2016), where the cultivation of a dedicated fanbase is a prerequisite for monetization.

The importance of relational labor and self-branding is deeply ingrained for most participants as an integral part of OnlyFans' unique affective environment, where the primary asset is the ability to monetize pre-existing popularity. Ricky sharply highlights this aspect:

To open an OnlyFans, you should first ask yourself, "Do I already have some followers? Will people actually give a fuck about me?" Because you can be the hottest person in the world, but without a network of contacts, without a follower base, you're gonna end up as a wasted talent, you know?

Ricky's outspoken remarks further demonstrate that a fundamental aspect of working on OnlyFans is that success does not depend on the aesthetic appeal of the creator or the quality of the content, but mainly on strategic self-marketing and leveraging a pre-existing fan base. Accordingly, creators involved in the study unanimously stress the critical role of consistent social media promotion as an essential prerequisite for building a successful career on OnlyFans. For them, adult content creation transcends conventional boundaries of sexual labor, transforming into a marketing profession that requires considerable organizational skills. Cherry, a 26-year-old American creator, provides a vivid account of the intricate multi-platform web that OnlyFans workers navigate. Her insights reveal how platformization is fundamentally reorienting sex work into the realm of advertising.

Well, you definitely have to advertise elsewhere: everyone using OnlyFans has a Twitter account, a Reddit, Tumblr, Instagram, whatever, to advertise OnlyFans [...] So you generate a following on these other platforms to direct people to the OnlyFans. It's very unlikely people will find you if you just have OnlyFans and nothing else to promote it. It's not a side gig, it's like a full-time thing and it's mostly a marketing job. I think that why I struggle with it a lot is that I'm not very good at marketing. More than anything, it's a marketing job [...]. It's about building a brand, building up a fan base and being consistent with your posts, so the best people for it are people who are savvy with marketing.

Cherry's perspective highlights the paramount importance of self-branding within the OnlyFans realm, effectively blurring the boundaries between sexual and creative labor. While existing literature has previously highlighted the relational dimension of this sexual labor, specifically the management of interpersonal relationships with clients, the transition to the platform economy has introduced a new dimension in which creators now face the challenges of digital self-promotion, audience engagement, and the evolving landscape of online content moderation and platform policies. The emphasis on the necessity of self-branding constitutes a thematic thread that runs through all

participants' narratives. As eloquently summarized by Beatrice, a successful Italian creator in her twenties:

To advertise your OnlyFans and bring people there, you need to gather them everywhere.

Beatrice's conception of ubiquity, as implied in her statement, represents a profound shift in the perception of sex work. Historically, sex work has often been seen as a marginalised and discreet profession. In the context of digital sex work, this meant that adult performers were expected to be tucked away in hidden corners of the internet. This was partly a response to societal concerns, including the moral panic surrounding the consumption of adult content by young people (Paasonen, 2011; Tiidenberg & Van der Nagel, 2020), but it was also a strategy adopted by workers themselves to protect their privacy and avoid context collapse (Campbell et al., 2019). However, a contrasting trend - a pervasive integration of sex work with social media, unprecedented in the digital landscape - has emerged with the mainstreaming of sex work (Hamilton et al., 2022) brought about by platforms such as OnlyFans.

Given the broad consensus among creators on the importance of pre-existing popularity as a necessary condition for gaining visibility on OnlyFans, the inability or reluctance to engage with multiple social media platforms can be seen as a barrier to entry. An inevitable implication is that the cultivation of social media profiles isn't just a vital component of their work on subscription platforms; it's a prerequisite that precedes their entry into the adult entertainment industry. Eleanor, a 32-year-old Ukrainian participant, remarkably quantifies this preparatory effort, establishing a specific number of followers as the precondition for entering the industry:

Before launching an OnlyFans, you must ensure all your social media pages are well-curated with enough following. It doesn't make any sense to start if you don't already have at least 5000 followers on the some of the main social networks.

Eleanor's quantifiable benchmark underscores the competitive nature of the industry, where follower counts serve as a measure of initial success and visibility. Her perspective reflects a broader trend highlighted in recent literature on social media influencers. The concept of audience quantification, as explored by Conill & Tandoc (2018), Zamith et al. (2019) and others, illustrates how follower metrics have become integral to establishing the value and influence of digital content creators. In this context, Eleanor's approach is not merely a personal strategy, but as a reflection of the wider industry standards where audience engagement is understood as clearly quantifiable.

To provide a broader image of the different engagement in different social media platforms, the table below outlines the social media use of the research participants involved in OnlyFans. As well as providing basic details such as pseudonyms, gender, age, and nationality, it illustrates the possible use of other sex work platforms in addition to OnlyFans and, most importantly, their professional use of other platforms. It shows the use of a wide range of mainstream platforms, including Instagram, X13, TikTok, Telegram, and others.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Nationality	Platform sex work	Use of other platforms
Litz	F	36	American	OnlyFans; Fansly;	Instagram; Twitch; Twitter; TikTok; Patreon; Youtube; Facebook; Etsy; Amazon Wishlist
Cherry	F	30	American	OnlyFans; Chaturbate	Instagram; Tinder
Patrick	M	35	American	OnlyFans; Cam4	Instagram; TikTok; Telegram; Twitter
Andrea	F	32	British	OnlyFans	Instagram; Amazon Wishlist
Lissandro	M	28	British	OnlyFans; Pornhub	Instagram; Telegram
Rose	F	31	French	OnlyFans; Seeking	Instagram; Telegram
Eugenie	F	25	French	OnlyFans	Twitter; Telegram; TikTok; Instagram
Stella	F	22	Italian	OnlyFans; Chaturbate; Stripchat; Bongacams	Instagram; Reddit; Telegram; Twitter; Amazon Wishlist

¹³ In the presentation of findings, the X platform is often referred to as Twitter, because the data collection was conducted between fall 2021 and spring 2023, before the change in ownership and name.

Cindy	F	21	Italian	OnlyFans	Instagram; TikTok; Twitter; Reddit; Amazon Wishlist; Telegram; Vinted
Margot	F	22	Italian	OnlyFans	Instagram; Tinder; Telegram
Valeria	F	21	Italian	OnlyFans	Instagram; TikTok; Reddit; Telegram; Twitter; Suicide Girls; Amazon Wishlist
Lily	F	31	Italian	OnlyFans	Instagram; Patreon; Facebook; Amazon Wishlist
Beatrice	F	24	Italian	OnlyFans; Pornhub	Instagram; TikTok; Telegram; Twitter; Amazon Wishlist; Youtube
Ursula	F	27	Italian	OnlyFans; Pornhub; Cam4	Instagram; Twitter; Telegram; Amazon Wishlist
Christian	M	29	Italian	OnlyFans; Pornhub	Instagram; Twitter; Telegram; Amazon Wishlist
Fabrizio	M	36	Italian	OnlyFans; MYM; Cam4	Instagram; Telegram
Mattia	M	47	Italian	OnlyFans; MYM; Fansly	Instagram; Telegram
Alex	M	23	Italian	OnlyFans;Po rnhub	Instagram; TikTok; Telegram
Clotilde	F	23	Italian	OnlyFans; Pornhub	Instagram; TikTok; Twitter; Telegram; Amazon Wishlist
Venere	F	22	Italian	OnlyFans	Instagram; TikTok; Twitter; Telegram; Facebook
Ricky	M	33	American	OnlyFans	Instagram

Angela	F	25	Italian	OnlyFans; MYM; Suicide Girls	Instagram; TikTok; Twitter; Telegram
Martic	F	19	Italian	OnlyFans	Instagram; Twitter; Telegram
Serena	F	20	Italian	OnlyFans; Chaturbate	Instagram; TikTok; Twitter; Telegram; Reddit
Eleanor	F	32	Ukrainian	OnlyFans	TikTok; Instagram
Rebecca	F	36	French		Instagram; Twitter; Telegram
Rita	F	34	Italian	OnlyFans	Instagram; TikTok; Youtube
Allison	F	31	Canadian	OnlyFans	Instagram; TikTok; Youtube; Etsy; Twitter; Twitch
Karen	F	30	Canadian	OnlyFans; My Free Cams; Fansly	Instagram; TikTok; Youtube; Amazon Wishlist; Feet Finder
Jacob	M	29	British	OnlyFans	Instagram; Telegram

Table 3: Social media use of research participants

While participants display different strategies when using social media to promote OnlyFans, with some focusing on multiple platforms and others on just one, such as Instagram, there's a common understanding of the importance of these platforms to career success. Creators strategically choose platforms based on their audience demographics and content guidelines. Instagram and TikTok, despite their large youth followings, pose challenges due to inconsistent content moderation, which affects sex workers. Reddit, valued for its access to niche markets, sometimes exposes creators to gender-based harassment. Platforms such as X and Telegram are favoured for their lenient content policies, but carry the risk of rapid, uncontrolled content proliferation. Beyond simply posting promotional content, creators like Karen proactively scrutinize their peers on platforms like Instagram and Reddit in order to adapt and innovate within their industry. She explains:

I scroll through Instagram and Reddit more or less to see what other girls are doing in my industry. I'm like: "Oh that's really cool! Let me re-do it, but in my own style". Because I have to stay on the top of it constantly.

The participant consciously conducts competitive analysis on platforms such as Instagram and Reddit, adapting and personalizing what she observes in her industry peers to stay ahead in the increasingly competitive and saturated field of platform-based sex work. To have success, it is perceived as necessary not only to promote oneself on different platforms, but doing so updating self-branding and content creation to new trends and innovations. Consequently, the inability or reluctance to engage with multiple social media platforms can be seen as a barrier to entry per se.

The discussion has explored how participants understand their reliance on social media promotion as an essential component for building a career on OnlyFans. The next section will delve into the implications of content moderation policies on creators' ability to promote themselves online.

The work of adult content creators in hostile media ecosystems

As previously mentioned, the implementation of FOSTA-SESTA laws has transformed social media into increasingly challenging environments for sex workers. Hence, the work of self-branding at the heart of OnlyFans' adult content creation involves considerable effort to navigate the challenges of social media content moderation. This constant struggle leaves creators constantly exposed to shadow bans and the removal of their content and even whole profiles. Andrea, a British content creator and professional dominatrix, passionately articulates the stigma they face due to social media's approach to nudity and sex work:

If you don't already have fans outside [OnlyFans], you won't get anywhere. Yet, if you advertise on Instagram, you get banned; on TikTok, you get banned; even on Twitter, you may get banned for being identified as a sex worker. So, you know what I mean, basically everybody hates you [laughs]. Wherever you go, nobody wants to know you are a sex worker, and if social media finds that out, you get banned.

The emotional toll of these content moderation challenges is significant, but they also lead to direct and serious practical implications. Rose's experiences offer a stark illustration of these material consequences:

When you get shadowbanned it's really annoying because you can't find any clients, so you have to just wave and suck it up. It's fucking tough world. Because you're doing all these things and you're shadowbanned, so you don't get the customers and you are still working but you're not making any money. It's so frustrating. [...] Yeah, like in the blink of an eye, everything is just like [she snaps her fingers] over, and you lost all your followers, so you have to start again. So that's why I also have a lot of backup accounts. [Otherwise] it's too easy, right [with an ironic tone]? You're just doing your thing and, you know, trying to make a living out of this. It's very upsetting.

Participants' experiences highlight the precarious nature of depending on social media for self-promotion, illustrating the challenges within a somewhat hostile digital ecosystem. Creators are compelled to continually adapt and innovate to mitigate the risks of deplatforming. Despite their efforts to adapt to platforms' regulations (which are rapidly changing and often difficult to comprehend for their vagueness), many get systematically shadowbanned or deplatformed anyway. Lily' and Cherry's following accounts show the frustration caused by the contradictory nature of these regulations. They articulate the need for constant adaptation and innovation to navigate ever-changing and often vague platform regulations. Lily maintains that:

Yeah, you have to be really smart about it; it has so many rules and you have to be really careful. So, for example, if you're wearing a bikini in your bedroom, you could be shadowbanned. But if you're wearing a bikini near water, then it's fine. Yeah, right? So, you just have to know, I guess.

Lily's observation about the idiosyncrasies of content rules, such as the inconsistent moderation of bikini images, underlines the often illogical and tricky nature of navigating these platforms. This complexity is further illustrated by Cherry's experience, where creators need to be aware of these nuanced rules and adapt creatively to stay within the boundaries of acceptable content.

It's a ridiculous way to view sexuality. It's to try and put sexuality into these weird boundaries and limits... Like, if I just took off my shirt and just stood there in a completely unsexy way, just stood with my shirt off, that would be removed for pornography. But if I did a whole like striptease video that was super slow and like poured milk all over myself and, you know, like slowly rubbing my body and everything, but I had nipple covers on the whole time, that's going to be fine.

Participants' sarcasm is evident in their accounts of the contradictory nature of content moderation rules, like the arbitrary distinction between acceptable and unacceptable content based on context, such as wearing a bikini in different settings. This opacity pushes creators to develop ingenious strategies, such as using portable swimming pools to produce content in their bedrooms

without triggering moderation algorithms. It is easily inferred from participants' accounts that identifying what content is considered inappropriate can be further complicated by the blurred and arbitrary boundaries set by platforms. They lead to a perceived ambiguity that often hinges on specific, narrowly defined elements, such as the display of female nipples or the wearing of swimwear outside of aquatic contexts, highlighting how the complexity of navigating moderation is increased by platforms' pervasive reliance on algorithmic detection of allegedly inappropriate content.

However, as platforms refine their moderation practices, creators also evolve their methods of resistance. For instance, Clotilde discusses a tactic widely used on TikTok, which involves using certain keywords to deceive algorithmic moderation:

Many girls, if their whole body is displayed in the video (even fully clothed), write the caption 'fake body' [...]. When the body is visible, you write 'fake body' in the description so that TikTok algorithm assumes that is a fake body, not a human one [laugh], so in theory, if you write in the caption something which deceives the algorithm, you would not be shadow banned.

Nevertheless, the participant also admits that:

But I am not really sure it works... sometimes my content gets blocked anyway. I guess you need to be lucky; there is not a single strategy [to avoid moderation].

This account, along with others, further illustrates that navigating moderation is an unpredictable process, often based on trial and error, with no guarantee of success. Moreover, there is a widespread perception that this moderation is applied unevenly to different categories of users, reflecting the double standards in content policing that Are and Paasonen (2021) have described thoroughly. Valeria's remark encapsulates the awareness of this inequality:

If you are a public or a famous character, then you are certainly more protected, both on Instagram and TikTok. And if you bring lots of followers, lots of views, generally you don't get banned on TikTok: your content is somewhat protected. For everybody else, unfortunately that's a real challenge.

The participant's perception echoes with Are and Paasonen's (2021) findings. The double standards in content policing entail that celebrities' posts systematically receive preferential treatment compared to similar content from sex workers. This sentiment is captured in Valeria's observation of the heightened protection and leniency afforded to public figures and popular accounts

on platforms like Instagram and TikTok, underscoring the inequality inherent in platforms' governance and how it constrains sex workers' ability to gain online visibility. Valeria also highlights, along with other participants, as already discussed before, the importance of quantity: the more successful a creator is, that is, the more traffic it generates on the platform, the better the creator is treated.

Despite these hardships, the necessity of multi-platform promotion remains due to the inherent design of the platforms where adult content creators earn their livelihood. Therefore, the discussion will now shift to examining the creative strategies employed to navigate the precarity of cross-platform dependency.

'Link in bio': Cross-platform promotional strategies of OnlyFans content creators

With the heightened scrutiny and precautionary measures toward sexual content moderation, even seemingly innocuous actions like displaying a OnlyFans link or using explicit language can result in shadow banning or profile deletion, akin to posting overtly sexual content. In response, workers have developed creative strategies to guide followers to their OnlyFans accounts. These include using allusive language, employing link trees, maintaining multiple backup accounts, and a massive reliance on Telegram channels. For example, creators subtly signal their engagement with OnlyFans on social media bios by using emoji combinations such as blue and white hearts, which symbolise the platform's interface colours. OnlyFans is often indirectly referred to as 'the blue website', or 'the website of love'. Sometimes it is even sufficient to mention 'to have one', taking for granted audiences' understanding of the suggestive references, as the examples below show.

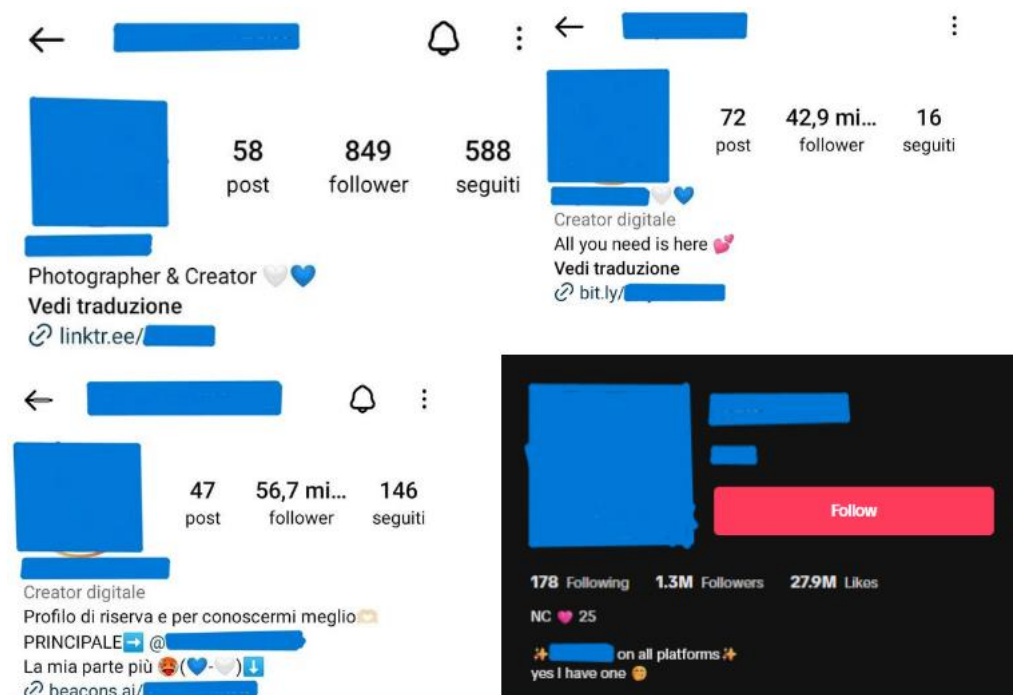


Figure 5: Examples of allusive reference to OnlyFans on social media

In this context, it has been previously seen how such implicit scripts adopted by creators on social media are not limited to their bio but to the captions and tags associated to their posts. The widespread recognition of these indirect references across different social media platforms is intriguing, as it suggests the formation of a unique vernacular within online communities, indicative of an evolving language surrounding adult entertainment in digital spaces. This shared understanding among diverse online users not only underscores the creativity of these creators, but also highlights the adaptability of digital communities in response to restrictive content policies, further illustrating the unprecedented entanglement of sex work with mainstream social media platforms introduced by OnlyFans.

Once made clear for the followers that the creator has an OnlyFans account, the issue becomes how to drive them there and towards all the other eventual platforms the creator is engaged with. The following visualization represents a map of participants' connections between the different platforms they used to enable potential subscribers to find their OnlyFans profiles. Frequently, the path from

social media to OnlyFans results in an intricate step-by-step road where users are driven to the explicit content like following the crumbs in the tale of Tom Thumb.

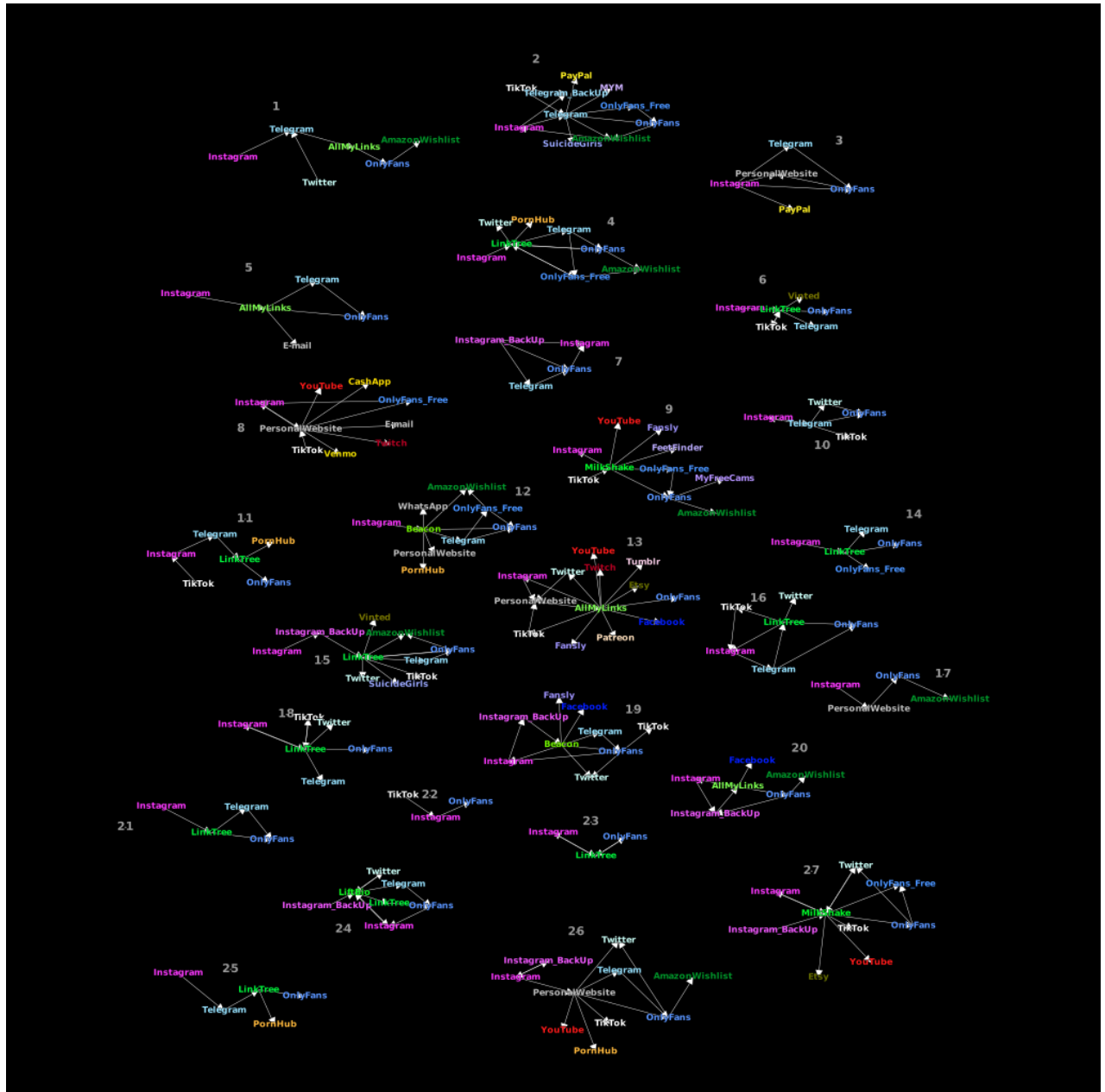


Figure 6: Link map of participants' cross platform connections

First of all, as it was expected, it is evident that, despite an exception (22) there are no direct links from a social network to OnlyFans, because this would likely lead to the removal of the creators' accounts. Most of them redirect followers from social media platforms to link trees, albeit some of

them prefer Telegram or employ Telegram as an intermediate step between the social media platforms and the link trees. In addition, some creators take an extra layer of caution by displaying their link tree on backup accounts, sometimes solely dedicated to this purpose. The unique role of Telegram is underlined by its direct links to OnlyFans, the only platform with this distinction, and openly stressed by participants such as Venere, who explain her cross-platform strategy as follows:

I mainly use Instagram stories to post a link that directs to Telegram, to avoid getting banned on Instagram. Directly putting the OnlyFans link could get me banned, so I encourage my followers - which I gather from TikTok and Instagram - to go to Telegram. From there, I always push them to go to OnlyFans. So it's kind of a tour of all the socials [laughs]. Thank goodness we have Telegram, really! [laughs].

In creators' cross-platform promotion, Telegram tends to serve three main roles. Firstly, it may act as an intermediary between social media platforms and link trees (1; 11), facilitating the redirection of followers to OnlyFans. Secondly, Telegram itself may constitute a replacement for a traditional link tree (2; 10; 25), providing a direct route for followers to access OnlyFans profiles. Finally, in several cases, Telegram functions as an alternative route to access OnlyFans profiles (3; 4; 5; 7; 12; 15; 16; 19; 21; 24; 26), providing users with a distinct way to engage with creators' content.

In practice, the path to participants' Onlyfans profiles takes two forms: it ranges from straightforward configurations (22; 23) to very complicated mazes (2; 13; 15; 19; 26; 27). In the first case, the connection map is linear, showing only the path from mainstream social media to a linktree where the link to Onlyfans is displayed. In the latter case, the maps show a complex structure, where the link tree acts as a gateway to a number of links, not only to Onlyfans, but also to other social media. These types of maps are often redundant, meaning that the link to Onlyfans is displayed in more than one platform (3; 4; 5; 7; 10; 12; 16; 19; 20; 21; 24; 26). This tendency can be interpreted as a strategic approach to ensure visibility in case of being banned from one of the platforms employed. It is noteworthy that both linear and complex routes can show a circular structure (3; 8; 19; 20; 24; 26; 27), namely that the cross-platform connections lead from mainstream social media to OnlyFans, and eventually back to social media (typically Instagram or Twitter). This can be interpreted in the light of the idealized authenticity at the core of audiences' imaginaries on OnlyFans creators, in the sense that providing connection to social media profiles on the OnlyFans bio may be functional to reinforce an idea of realness and accountability to meet perceived audience expectations. In a few maps, also a payment channel, such as Paypal (2; 3), Venmo (8) and CashApp (8), is involved,

highlighting that creators do not rely solely on OnlyFans as a source of income, but engage also in informal exchanges of content with users, usually through Telegram.

The strategy of operating multiple accounts on a single platform (7; 15; 19; 20; 24; 26; 27) is also noteworthy; moreover, by varying the level of nudity across accounts, creators can tailor their presentation to be both explicit and more subdued. In other words, multidirectional approach does not only aim to broaden their visibility but also serves to minimize the risk of deplatforming. The approach of diversifying platforms is also evident from the use of other platforms for adult entertainment, ranging from webcam platforms such as My Free Cams (9), to well-known adult entertainment spaces such as Pornhub (4; 11; 12; 25; 26) and Suicide Girls (2; 15), to subscription platforms which allow for sexual content, alike Onlyfans, although they are less popular, such as Fansly (9; 13; 19), Feet Finder (9), and MYM (2) to platforms that also present a digital patronage model yet without being connected to sexual content, such as Youtube (8; 9; 13; 26; 27) Patreon (13) and Twitch (8; 13).

As it evident from the maps, and stressed by participants throughout the interviews, Amazon Wishlist constitutes for OnlyFans creators another means of monetization. Remarkably, possible connections to Amazon Wishlist (1; 2; 4; 9; 12; 15; 17; 20; 26) are usually directly from the OnlyFans (1; 4; 9; 17; 20; 26), without being displayed on social media or intermediated by the linktree (2; 12; 15). Presumably, creators are aware that only users already loyal enough to purchase their OnlyFans subscription would be willing to spend more money to buy them gifts. In this context, therefore, the link tree functions as a tool that enables the cross-platform embedding that is essential for gaining visibility as an OnlyFans creator.

One might expect the development of a unified strategy for cross-platform self-promotion as a form of algorithmic gossiping (Bishop, 2019), a concept that refers to the strategic exchange of knowledge and information about algorithms within a community of creators in order to increase visibility on social media platforms (Bishop, 2019; Arriagada & Bishop, 2021; Mniestri & Randerath, 2023). However, the diversity of approaches taken by different participants highlights the individualised nature of cross-platform promotion - a subjective process characterised by trial and error. This diversity reflects the lack of a common, established strategy for managing cross-platform presence. Although certain patterns of behaviour suggest that a form of algorithmic gossiping is indeed taking place, individual tactics reveal complex and heterogeneous structures. It shows that it

is a subjective process characterised by trial and error, reflecting the lack of a shared established strategy for managing cross-platform presence. Overall, engaging with multiple platforms emerges as a strategic countermeasure against the threat of reduced visibility due to stringent moderation policies. Furthermore, the expansion across various platforms is often valued by creators as a method to diversify their audience and establish their reputation in a highly competitive space.

It can be seen that participants' promotional efforts often extend beyond the realm of social media. Indeed, their cross-platform embedding combines the possibilities of mainstream social media and online payment platforms, as well as developing alternative uses of messaging apps such as Telegram. In addition, dating apps such as Tinder may offer the potential to attract followers beyond one's existing network, as Margot explains:

Well, you need to consider that many people who follow me on Instagram come from Tinder; everybody who follow me on OnlyFans comes from Instagram, so for transitive property, let's say, that is the flow. Actually, I would recommend it to everybody, because Instagram works like a bubble: so a person who is in a different network than yours will never find you. Tinder, on the other hand, is very horizontal, that is, it [works] mostly in terms of location. [...] The good thing of Tinder it that it allows you to go beyond Instagram bubble. I think that's the smartest marketing strategy.

The use of Tinder as a means to location-based networking aimed at reaching new audiences beyond the 'Instagram bubble' represents a creative self-branding strategy that has never been observed in studies on digital sex work. The participant's use of Tinder exclusively for promotional purposes suggests how digital platforms can be re-signified not only by top-down changes in technological infrastructures and governance (Poell et al., 2021), but also how users' evolving practices and attached meanings play a crucial role in these transformations, with users creatively contributing to such dynamic processes of reconfiguring digital spaces. Yet, in the context of digital sex work, it important to consider that, although Tinder presents opportunities for broadening workers' audience reach, its geographic specificity raises notable concerns about privacy and safety, particularly for creators cautious about revealing their location to potential customers. This dilemma highlights a paradox in the realm of content accessibility on OnlyFans, as discussed in the third chapter of the thesis. On one hand, the requirement for users to purchase a monthly subscription seems to offer a degree of privacy protection for creators. On the other hand, the necessity of promoting their profiles on various free social media platforms inevitably limits their control over

content dissemination. Thus, creators find themselves navigating a delicate balance between gaining visibility and maintaining privacy.

Having established the importance of cross-platform embedding, the following section will focus on creators' practical engagement with multi-platform branding. It will explore participants' conceptualisations and practices of self-representation across social media, examining the ways in which they manage the distinctive technological infrastructures and perceived audiences of the platforms they use for promotion.

The presentation of the self in the sex gig economy: self-branding strategies of OnlyFans creators across different social media

Goffman's (1956) seminal work, 'The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life,' explores how individuals engage in impression management, presenting themselves strategically in social interactions. Utilizing a theatrical metaphor, Goffman distinguishes between 'front stage' and 'backstage' areas, representing public and private selves, respectively. Central to this process is the concept of the 'imagined audience,' where individuals tailor their behaviours based on their perception of others' views, even in the absence of an actual audience. This notion is particularly relevant in the digital age, as individuals curate their online personas to project authenticity while aligning with perceived audience expectations (Döbler, 2022). This section, echoing Goffman's work's title, delves into the self-presentation strategies of OnlyFans creators. It examines how their approaches to self-branding reflect an understanding of each platform's affordances and the imagined expectations of their followers, highlighting how their different styles reflect an understanding of the affordances of each platform and the imagined expectations of their followers. It looks at how the specific features of these platforms and the perceived nature of their audiences shape the development and presentation of creators' brand identities. Despite the variability of their strategies, a common thread in the participants' narrative is the tension between authenticity and professionalism, and between amateurism and self-entrepreneurship. These dualities are exemplary of the broader experience of precarity that the current literature identifies with the platformised creative sector (Poell et al., 2021; Duffy, 2017). While creators emphasize the necessity of utilizing multiple social media platforms to cultivate a substantial fanbase, they acknowledge that each social media environment possesses unique characteristics, influencing the style of self-presentation that is

expected. Valeria, a creator with a keen understanding of marketing, outlines the strengths and limitations of the platforms she utilizes:

Twitter is good to reach foreign people because it is much more used abroad than in Italy. I have a lot of followers there. Also, the good thing about Twitter is that it allows for nudity, sexual content and so on. Instagram is very popular, pretty much everywhere, so it's the main platform everybody uses to promote themselves. The only thing is that it stops you all the time because, of course, you can't post any nude or sexual content; you need to be very careful even with your captions and links. The problem with Instagram is that you get shadowbanned and therefore you can't reach new people. TikTok is very important to grow, in my opinion: I think it's the social network which can make you viral out of luck -of course there also also algorithms – but it can suddenly bring you a lot of views, lots of followers. The only thing is that alike Instagram, you cannot post certain content, even certain captions. Hence, it's very difficult for sex workers to grow on Instagram and TikTok. It would be easier if there was no shadowban.

Valeria's comments illustrate the practical considerations that OnlyFans creators must navigate when choosing social media platforms. Her analysis points to Twitter's and Telegram's favourable tolerance of adult content (with the latter also valued for the privacy it enhances), as opposed to Instagram's and TikTok's popular but restrictive policies. As strongly emphasised throughout the chapter, the tendency of platforms to shadow ban content that violates their policies poses significant challenges for sex workers, limiting their ability to reach new audiences. This highlights the ongoing tension between the need for visibility and the constraints imposed by platform policies, a common dilemma in the platformised landscape of sex work. Each individual platform presents unique challenges for self-promotion, not only due to varying degrees of freedom of expression and privacy determined by each platform's specific configurations, but also because of the implicit aesthetic requirements of their environments. Beyond understanding different moderation policies, multi-platform branding demands the ability to adapt one's performative styles to suit particular affordances and audiences. Cindy, an adult content creator and social media influencer, illustrates this with her contrasting approaches to Instagram and TikTok.

I mainly use Instagram and TikTok. My posts on Instagram are very aesthetically pleasing, that's it – but recently I've been trying to be more chilled, to post more things that I just like – and I use the stories like an outlet; There I post random things that amuse me, I mean it's the main way how I communicate with my followers because it's direct, whereas on TikTok you only have comments. TikTok is not like Instagram, where you take a selfie, maybe you edit and then post it with a random

inspirational caption, like “Respect yourself!”. On TikTok you need to convey a lot of energy! It’s very different ‘cause it’s a video, so you need to have the right energy and be able to convey it. It’s much more difficult than Instagram. I think that - as much as a TikTok video can actually be authentic - it feels authentic, so it is more difficult to produce.

Cindy conceives Instagram as requiring aesthetic rigor and facilitating direct interactivity with users, while she associates TikTok with a different kind of energy due to its video-centric format. In particular, TikTok is described as a platform where authenticity is more pronounced, although a certain cautiousness in the conception of authenticity emerges from her aside ‘as much as a TikTok video can actually be authentic.’ Indeed, Cindy’s performances display the kind of choreographed authenticity widely associated with social media influencer cultures (Marwick & boyd, 2011; Abidin, 2016, 2018). As the literature on social media content production suggests, while amateur content is idealized as spontaneous and authentic, it is actually carefully crafted to meet the expectations of the platform and its audience. Marwick and boyd (2011) propose the concept of ‘choreographed performances of the self’ to describe the process in which social media platforms provide a stage for individuals to perform their identities, and how these performances are often carefully curated and managed to convey a sense of authenticity while aligning with audience expectations and social norms. Abidin (2018) delves into the notion of ‘aesthetic labor’ in the context of social media influencers, highlighting the deliberate effort and strategic planning that goes into creating and maintaining an authentic persona online. Accordingly, the construction of online ‘micro-celebrity’ (Abidin, 2016) involves strategic self-presentation and audience interaction to cultivate a sense of authenticity, while maintaining a professional management of online brand identity. In Cindy’s case, the differentiation in content production for Instagram and TikTok clearly showcases this dichotomy. On Instagram, her content is more controlled and visually curated, whereas on TikTok, the demand for perceived authenticity necessitates a different kind of performance, one that feels more immediate and energetic. This dichotomy reflects the broader tension influencers navigate between maintaining an authentic self-presentation and adhering to the performative demands of various social media platforms. Interestingly, participants’ narratives reveal contrasting views on the potential for authenticity fostered by different platforms, highlighting the subjectivity of individual imaginaries rather than a clear shared collective consensus. Cindy’s previous account suggests skepticism about Instagram’s suitability for authentic expression, highlighting its emphasis on aesthetics and curated content. In stark contrast, Cherry frames her preference for Instagram precisely in terms of its potential for authenticity.

I mostly use Instagram because I like it, I like the visual format. Although it is one of the most difficult and unforgiving platforms for sex workers in that it really deletes us. All of my friends and me myself have been deleted multiple times, yet I keep coming back [laugh]. But I like it because it's very visual and I like to just present myself as I am, in a very authentic way.

A strong ambivalence emerges in Cherry's views, as she deems Instagram as her favourite social media despite openly criticising its stigmatizing approach to sex workers.

Adaptability in content creation encompasses not just expressive styles but also the kind of content deemed effective for each social media environment. Instagram and X are almost diametrically opposed in this context: Instagram is notorious for its rigorous moderation policies, while X is known for its more permissive approach. This dichotomy has significant implications for how creators produce promotional content. On Instagram, the challenge is to craft non-explicit yet captivating content that arouses followers' curiosity, encouraging them to seek out more explicit material on OnlyFans. Conversely, on X creators must generate explicit content that stands apart from their OnlyFans offerings, ensuring it is appealing but does not eclipse the exclusive content of the subscription platform. These divergent strategies illustrate the complexity of strategically aligning content with the distinct moderation policies and audience engagement patterns of each platform. Litz's experience sheds light on the strategic considerations creators must balance when posting content on platforms with varying moderation policies. In her words:

On Instagram I definitely do a lot safer content because I have had a lot of images taken down and they have threatened to delete my account. And I've seen so many people have their accounts deleted lately that I'm very careful. Twitter is basically where you can post anything, really. So, I still don't post anything really racy because I mean, why would you subscribe to my OnlyFans, then, right?

This account provides a clear example of the caution required on Instagram due to its strict moderation, as opposed to the permissive environment of Twitter. On the other hand, the challenge of more permissive platforms is that posting overly explicit content could be counterproductive, in the sense of reducing the incentive for users to subscribe to OnlyFans for exclusive access. The need to adapt modes of self-presentation according to different contexts is not only a tactical necessity, but also an opportunity for creators to showcase their creativity and originality and thus differentiate themselves from competitors. Beatrice, a successful Italian creator in her twenties, emphasises the need for inventive platform-specific branding styles:

When you work online, you must be present on every platform [...] you have to be everywhere. I believe you shouldn't always take a physical approach. For example, TikTok blocks you immediately if you show something explicit, something sexual, so you always need to change the way you express yourself. I mean, maybe on one platform you need to use your sense of humour, on another you need to use written words, whereas somewhere else you need to play with your body a bit more. The thing about having so many platforms is that you have to be creative: you can't just show your naked body - also because many platforms don't allow that - so you have to find other ways to market yourself.

The adaptation of self-presentation modes across different platforms, as Beatrice's experience illustrates, demonstrates the reconfiguration of sexual labor in the platform economy that the present contribution attempts to frame. The necessity to creatively express and market oneself beyond aesthetic appeal, adapting to the peculiar environments of different platforms reflect a re-signification of digital sex work as creative work where effective adaptation in a multi-platform ecosystem becomes more central than the production of sexual content itself.

Creators' choices in promotional content style are often part of a deliberate process of audience selection. Margot, for instance, describes her Instagram aesthetic as targeting an 'elite' following - people who appreciate the quality of her content beyond mere nudity.

I don't know, I like to have an artistic line, so I post pictures that are not particularly hot, [...] Because I'm not interested in attracting random people just because I have pictures of my bum. I mean, I'd like to have a following that—obviously they're a certain kind of people, who I'd never go out for a coffee with, you know - but they appreciate that kind of thing, that I don't like to distort.'

This approach to audience selection by Margot, focusing on attracting a specific type of follower, finds resonance in Stella's account, which helps clarify the meaning attributed to such a loose category as 'random people' in this context.

You should carry on a certain kind of persona on social media, a character that you create and carry it on social in a safe-for-work way, so without showing nude content. Basically, you should create a fanbase as an internet character. I've recently started my new page on Instagram, just about cosplaying, and that's where I think I'm going to link my OnlyFans. I think I'm going to grow my fanbase safe-for-work from cosplays so that I bring to OnlyFans people who like cosplay and kinda nerdy stuff. I wanna create a different kind of audience, because the one I have now on OnlyFans

is just an audience.... Dunno, of normal wankers [laughs], I mean it's not an audience with a target, but now I want to achieve that.'

Stella's candid labelling of her OnlyFans audience as 'normal wankers' sheds light on the notion of 'random people' as those without a specific shared interest or targeted appeal. In this sense, the 'random people' Margot seeks to filter out are akin to the broad and undifferentiated audience Stella currently has on OnlyFans. Stella's strategic shift towards a more defined, interest-specific audience underlines the same intent as Margot's—to move away from a generic audience and towards one with particular tastes or interests. However, Margot's admission that they are 'a certain kind of people, who I'd never go out for a coffee with' suggests that, ultimately, the distinction might be more about perception than reality – an implication that, in essence, both still cater to a similar demographic.

This strategic approach to audience selection, as illustrated by Margot and Stella, reveals a common theme among OnlyFans creators: the key to effective self-branding lies in the ability to judiciously blend explicit and non-explicit elements in their digital self-presentation. In doing so, creators aim not only to navigate the content moderation policies of different platforms, but also to position themselves within distinctive niche markets. This nuanced balancing act allows them to appeal to specific segments of followers, thus fostering a more targeted and engaged audience. This tactic of combining different elements of their online persona to cater to niche interests is indicative of a wider trend among digital content creators, particularly in the adult entertainment sector. The next, and final section of the chapter builds on this understanding by discussing an exploratory cross-platform analysis of the promotional posts of 100 OnlyFans creators on Instagram and TikTok. Examining the profiles of a relatively wide sample of creators on these two platforms aims to provide a deeper insight into the intricate ways in which OnlyFans creators adapt to the specific constraints and opportunities of different social media platforms.

A cross-platform analysis of OnlyFans creators' promotional practices on Instagram and TikTok

In order to validate the findings of the interviews, which are inevitably limited by the small size and limited heterogeneity of the sample, an exploratory ethnographic analysis of 100 profiles of OnlyFans creators from different countries on Instagram and TikTok was conducted. The focus on these two platforms is due to their widespread use by this category of creators to attract diverse audiences, exploiting and adapting to the specific affordances and aesthetic norms of these social

media. TikTok, for example, is valued mainly for its potential for virality, while it is perceived as challenging due to the energetic performance expected by the audience, as revealed by the participants' accounts. Instagram, on the other hand, is seen as fundamental to achieving visibility due to its popularity among different categories of users with different demographic and geographical backgrounds. In addition, its visual nature allows adult content creators to exploit its aesthetic appeal and give users an indication of the aesthetic style of content they can expect to find on their OnlyFans profiles. However, Instagram's strict moderation policies are seen as the main threat to visibility. As seen in the link map above, many OnlyFans creators attempt to mitigate the risk of shadow banning or profile removal by maintaining multiple accounts simultaneously.

Furthermore, Instagram and TikTok were chosen as case studies for this cross-platform study because the digital ethnography conducted throughout the fieldwork revealed a relational perception of Instagram and TikTok in the platform imaginaries of creators, as illustrated in the examples summarised in the figure below.

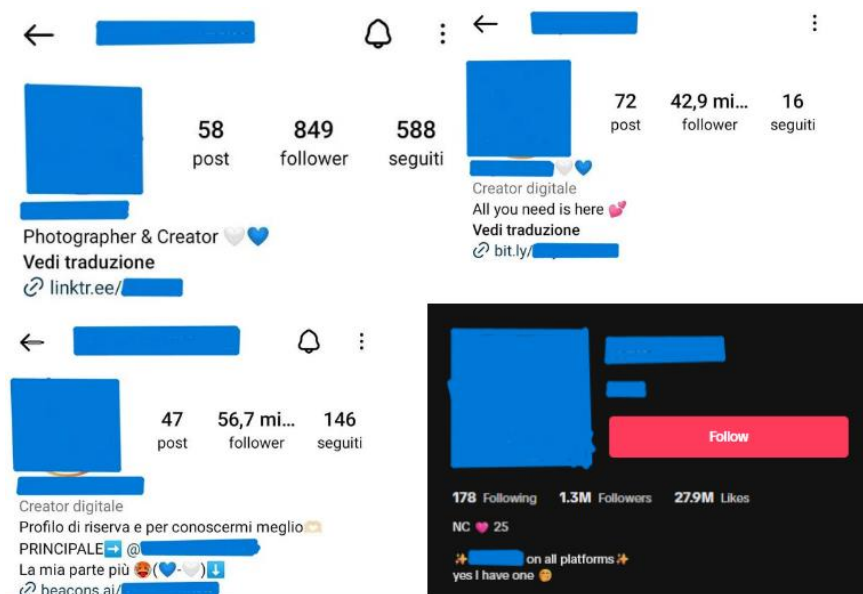


Figure 7: Allusive references to Instagram on creators' TikTok bios

As the screenshots above show, a common theme in TikTok bios is the suggestion that more provocative content is available on their Instagram profiles. TikTok is thus seen as a gatekeeper, directing potential followers to the creators' Instagram accounts and then, through the link connections, to their subscription profiles. This function of TikTok can also be seen in the link map

presented earlier, which shows that TikTok rarely has direct connections to linktrees or OnlyFans. Even connections to Instagram profiles in TikTok bios are typically made by explicitly writing the Instagram username, suggesting that TikTok discourages direct linking in bios. Based on these considerations, this exploratory study treated TikTok as a gateway to access the population of interest, namely OnlyFans creators who simultaneously promote themselves on Instagram and TikTok. Thus, the preliminary sample of creators was retrieved on TikTok through a series of queries (for details on the sampling protocol, see the methodological chapter). This resulted in a sub-sample of users with Instagram bios in their profiles, ensuring that their professional presence on OnlyFans was also verified. An ethnographic content analysis of all their posts on the two platforms was conducted to assess how adult content creators adapt their content to the specific affordances, content moderation policies and perceived audience expectations of these different social media environments.

As expected from the interview accounts, a clear finding is the uniqueness of content on each platform, with creators predominantly tailoring original content to the specific aesthetics and vernacular of Instagram and TikTok, rather than cross-posting. This approach is consistent with the concept of platform-specific self-branding (Scolere et al., 2018). In addition to proposing original posts on each platform, creators also tend to diversify their content thematically.

Overall, on the one hand, the format of content production on TikTok seems to be mainly inspired by the latest popular trends, while integrating personalised elements. On the other hand, content production on Instagram tends to convey individual aesthetic tastes, hobbies and interests in a comprehensive way that aims to reflect the subjectivity of the creators, rather than being standardised according to conventional patterns, as is common on TikTok.

However, there are both distinctive modes of use and commonalities in the production of promotional content across the two platforms. The main common patterns of behaviour on Instagram and TikTok relate to audience engagement strategies, the integration of creators' personal lives, and a general consistency in their digital persona. Indeed, on both platforms, they tend to actively engage their audience through questions, comments or captions designed to encourage interaction, as evidenced by the widespread use of text overlays and direct calls to respond to users' comments.

In terms of personal life integration, many creators weave elements of their daily lives, hobbies or personal interests into their content, ranging from showcasing pets to discussing everyday

experiences, sharing romantic relationships or even motherhood. A final significant commonality is the overall tendency of creators to maintain a consistent self-characterisation across both platforms. This consistency is often achieved through a combination of visual aesthetics, thematic consistency (e.g. cosplay, gaming culture, self-deprecation), and a consistent style in their content, such as adopting similar frames, clothing styles, and other presentation elements.

As already highlighted, significant differences also emerged between the promotional use of Instagram and TikTok by creators. On Instagram, content tended to be more explicit, with a higher frequency of lingerie or bikini photos and overtly sexy or seductive imagery, despite Meta's strict moderation policy on nudity. Counterintuitive as it may sound, this trend could be interpreted as a growing expertise among creators in navigating content moderation by producing content that is enticing enough to gain visibility without violating the platform's policies. However, as interviewees revealed, while Meta's content moderation policies are detailed in its guidelines, TikTok's are perceived as more arbitrary and difficult to interpret, leading creators to choose safer content as a precautionary measure to avoid shadow banning or content or profile removal. Pushed to use other performative strategies than simply exploiting their aesthetic appeal, creators' promotional content on TikTok often shows greater variability and creativity, including lip-syncing, dance routines, popular soundtracks, and participation in viral trends or challenges.

While Instagram content is often more polished and visually appealing, there is less variation in format compared to the dynamic nature of users' posts on TikTok. The way in which creators adapt their content is also likely to differ due to perceived platform restrictions. TikTok's stricter moderation policies lead to more cautious content creation, with creators often sticking to safer, less explicit content. Instagram, despite its strict policies, seems to allow slightly more leeway in terms of explicit content. The style of interaction with followers also differs between the platforms, with TikTok often seeing more direct interaction through video content and replies to comments, while Instagram interaction is typically mediated through photo captions and stories. Another notable difference is the degree of professionalism and casualness observed across the platforms. Some creators exhibit a more professional and curated presence on Instagram, characterised by high-quality images and well-composed shots. In contrast, TikTok content often appears more casual and spontaneous, with a focus on authenticity and relatability.

This exploratory cross-platform analysis supported the interview findings that OnlyFans creators strategically adapt their content and presentation style to the unique affordances and audience expectations of each platform. This is exemplified by the specific promotional uses of Instagram and TikTok. While Instagram serves as a platform for more explicit content and a polished, professional self-presentation, TikTok promotes a more spontaneous, engaging and creative content style that often aims to be perceived by audiences as more casual and authentic. This strategic adaptation to the particular dynamics of each platform underscores the repurposing of digital sex work as a labor of self-branding that characterises the creation of adult content on OnlyFans, and seems to support the argument that the key change wrought by digital patronage platforms in the context of online sex work is that in order to maintain a financial relationship with the platform on which they sell adult content, workers are pushed to continue producing content for a variety of other platforms for free, often investing more time and effort than on OnlyFans itself because of the need to diversify their promotional strategies across different platforms.

Furthermore, the thematic styles of creators' social media profiles tend to be either highly specific or highly generic. The former may reflect the importance of accessing specific niche markets, as suggested by the interview data, while the latter appears to be consistent with the appeal of an idealised ordinariness that distinguishes OnlyFans creators from mainstream porn performers and other professionalised segments of the digital sex workforce. Common to both approaches, however, is the integration of various references to popular media cultures (i.e. films, music styles, etc.) into creators' self-presentation.

This trend can be understood in light of the concept of pornification (Paasonen et al., 2007), which has been proposed to argue that a process of sexualisation of culture is taking place in Western societies, evidenced by a general increase in the visibility of sexually explicit representations, blurring the boundaries between pornographic and mainstream cultures. Significantly, the kind of pornographic representation that emerges in the context of OnlyFans reflects an ambivalent relationship to this concept. On the one hand, the process of mainstreaming sex work that characterises OnlyFans can be framed as an instance of pornification, given the unprecedented visibility of this category of sex worker in mainstream media (i.e. newspapers, magazines, TV shows) and user-generated content on social media (i.e. memes), which present imaginaries of the life-changing earning potential of a career on OnlyFans. On the other hand, there is an opposite tendency. Creators' self-branding efforts on social media imply the integration of elements of mainstream

cultures into the production of sexual content. This trend can be linked to three main factors. First, creators' awareness of the challenges of an increasingly competitive and saturated market, where aesthetic appeal is not enough to ensure lasting visibility, pushes them to position themselves in niche cultures in order to build a fan base. Secondly, the display of subjective interests helps to convey a sense of authenticity and relatability that fans presumably expect. Finally, the moderation of social media content limits the ability of creators to promote themselves by posting overly sexualised content on social media. As a result, they must develop a digital persona that attracts users' attention without being banned. This is typically achieved by displaying snippets of everyday life, cultivating hobbies, cultural references or adhering to aesthetic standards conventionally associated with particular subcultures.

Conclusion

This chapter highlighted the strategies content creators employ to drive users to their OnlyFans accounts. Since, by design, the access to the accounts is possible only through direct links, creators must engage with other platforms to self-brand and promote their activity, surfing through different content moderation policies, across platforms and over time. This challenge imposes, at first, the adoption of vernacular and emoticons on social media, to signal the existence of an OnlyFans account. Once made it clear, albeit surreptitiously, creators need to lead followers towards their subscription profiles. To do so, they often build up intricate paths that show the crucial importance of cross-platform embeddedness for a successful career on digital patronage platform. The main pieces of evidence are the employment of link trees as a gateway for redirecting users from mainstream social media to other platforms (in multiple cases not only OnlyFans but also other social media, Telegram, Pornhub and Amazon), and the fundamental role of Telegram, which stands out as an intermediate step between mainstream social media and OnlyFans and serves also as an intermediary for exchanging content for direct payments. This leads to the conclusion that this type of digital sex workers is inevitably dependent on different platforms, both those on which they earn money and those on which they need to promote themselves. Furthermore, within the digital sex work market, these platforms are themselves interdependent within a complex ecosystem that combines different types of digital environments, including social media, subscription platforms, online payment systems and messaging apps. The concept of affordance-driven cross platform dependency has been proposed

to capture the idea that the affordances of OnlyFans force creators to monetise their pre-existing popularity on social media, as the platform's features effectively limit creators from reaching a wider audience through the platform alone. As a result, individual success in digital patronage (as discussed by Bonifacio & Wohn, 2020) depends primarily on the ability to effectively manage one's digital presence across different social media platforms. This is consistent with the overarching trends observed in increasingly platform-driven creative industries (as discussed by Scolere et al., 2018, and Gandini, 2016), where cultivating a dedicated fan base is a prerequisite for monetisation. However, the self-branding efforts of adult content creators within the cross-platform ecology is inherently precarious given the constant threat of invisibility posed by social media content moderation policies.

In short, through an investigation of creators' self-branding labor of social media, the discussion has attempted to unveil the node between OnlyFans and social media, which constitutes a unique example of a such intimate overlapping between adult entertainment platforms and mainstream social media, yet not tackled by existing literature and suggesting a process of increasing integration of popular cultures into amateur sexual content production.

It is important to note that some ethical concerns arise when showing and discussing the strategies digital sexual workers employ to overcome content moderation policies. On the one hand, unveiling these strategies may harm those workers, because their effort and creativity is exposed to the public (so, potentially, to the social media platforms), and the knowledge of the methods adopted to trick may serve as a source to foster a hardening of the policies. But, on the other hand, only discussing in detail how digital platforms make life uneasy for this category of workers, social attention may be drawn to this issue, attempting to sensitize policy makers, users, decision-makers, and workers themselves.

Chapter 5. The work subjectivity of OnlyFans adult content creators. The intertwinement of emotional and relational labor in platformised sex work

Introduction

This chapter will delve into the intricate blend of emotional (Hochschild, 1979) and relational (Baym, 2016) labor characterizing the work experiences of OnlyFans content creators. It will explore how their interactions with OnlyFans' unique platform environment, especially in relation to its specific user interaction modes and related time management, shape their work subjectivity. The argument will partly draw on comparisons with the alternative model of webcam platforms, as done in chapter 3, to illustrate how different socio-technical infrastructures of adult entertainment platforms shape the complexities of emotional relational dynamics experienced by workers. The discussion will also focus creators' reflections on their professional wellbeing and their perceptions of professionalism within this form of platformized sex work. The analysis uncovers the inherent ambivalence at the core of creators' lived experiences, marked by a nuanced intertwinement of empowerment and precarity.

The proposed argument aims to answer the following research questions:

How does the specific socio-technical infrastructure of OnlyFans affect the emotional dimension of work?

How do OnlyFans content creators navigate the interplay between emotional and relational labor in their work?

How does the platform environment of OnlyFans shape the work identity and subjectivity of digital sex workers?

The discussion will mainly draw on the theoretical frameworks of Hochschild (1979), Baym (2016). To explore the intricate dynamics of emotional and relational labor in OnlyFans work, the chapter begins with a brief review of key theories, followed by an analysis of user interaction modes on different models of adult entertainment platforms and how they affect the emotional dimension of sex work. Afterwards, the analysis delves into the different time management strategies entailed by different sex work platforms. Lastly, in order to unveil the kind of work subjectivity emerging from engagement with the distinctive environment of OnlyFans, it first investigates participants' imaginaries regarding the professional skills deemed necessary for success on the platform and it concludes with a discussion on job satisfaction and wellbeing, highlighting the complexities and contradictions inherent in this form of platformized sex work.

Literature review

Relational (Baym, 2015) and emotional labor (Hochschild, 1979) are distinct but related concepts in the context of work and emotional regulation, although the former was formulated in relation to the creative industries while the latter emerged in the context of service work.

Emotional labor, as defined by Hochschild (1979), involves workers' real-time management of both their own and their clients' emotions to align with organizational or professional expectations (James, 1989). It encompasses all the invisible work required to manage and display emotions in the workplace in a way that is consistent with the organisation's desired image (Hochschild, 1979). This concept has been pivotal in understanding the psychological demands and impacts on workers in various sectors, including digital sex work.

Hochschild's theory has been applied to make sense of the management of feelings within client-worker relationships in sex work (Boris et al., 2010; Hoang, 2010). Hoang (2010) particularly illustrates how women in different sex industry sectors engage in varying forms of emotional labor, from repressive in the lower end to expressive in higher tiers. Moreover, the adaptation of this theory to digital sex work, as analyzed by Bibi (2020), shows the nuanced emotional regulation and performance in online interactions, demonstrating the central role of emotional management in digital erotic performances.

Baym's (2015) theory, on the other hand, emphasizes the sustained effort in maintaining professional relationships in media work, blending personal and economic aspects and establish such effort at the core of the labor process in the creative economies. The concept of relational labor refers to creative workers' pressure to "foster and maintain ongoing interactions with their audiences" (Baym, 2015: 2) with the aim of stabilizing their careers. The concept focuses on the ongoing interactive and emotional work involved in maintaining relationships and managing impressions in different contexts (Ward et al., 2019). According to Baym (2015), relational labor differs from emotional labor (Hochschild, 1979) because it does not take place during an interaction, but is rather an ongoing endeavour (Baym, 2015).

The existing literature, while extensively applying these theories individually, tends to treat emotional and relational labor as distinct concepts. This chapter aims to fill this gap by demonstrating how these theories uniquely intertwine in the digital labor of adult content creators. By establishing a bridge between these theories, this chapter aims to show how the socio-technical infrastructure of OnlyFans uniquely combines the dynamics of emotional and relational labor, offering a new perspective on professional experiences in digital sex work.

Modes of user interactions

A striking difference between sex work on OnlyFans and through webcam platforms lies in the modes of user interaction, particularly in the context of synchronous versus asynchronous engagement, which has relevant implications for the types of emotional management required by each group. In contrast to the dynamics of live webcam shows, the services provided on OnlyFans transcend the boundaries of a pre-defined audience and the intensity of real-time performance. As a result, the nature of the interaction is significantly different: webcam models are forced to engage in on-the-spot emotional management by consistently responding politely to user requests, even when faced with requests or attitudes that are deemed inappropriate. This obligation stems from the potential repercussions of negative reviews, which can profoundly affect their ranking and subsequent visibility on the platform's dashboard. Conversely, creators on OnlyFans can decide autonomously to opt for live performances, albeit at prices higher than the average per-minute rates of webcam shows (see Figures 2. and 3.) or to abstain from synchronous interactions altogether.

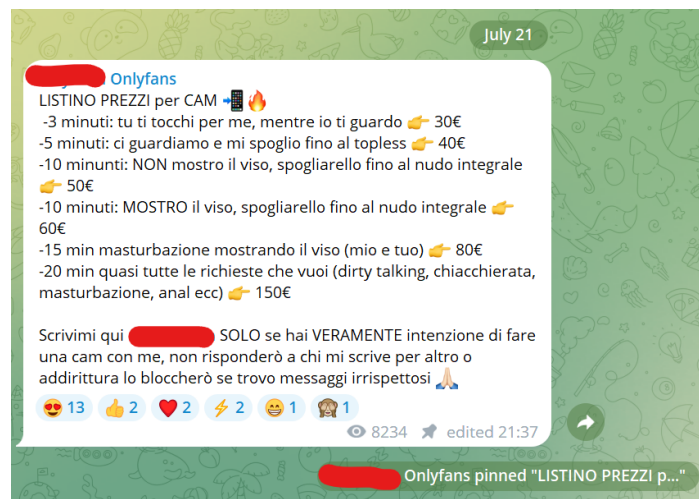


Figure 8: Screenshot from an ad of cam services displayed in the Telegram channel of an OnlyFans creator. See the translation in the footnote.

\$ Rates and Shows

Private Chat
\$4.04 per minute
Exclusive Chat
\$5.04 per minute
Block Sessions
Offer discounts for longer paid chats
Rate Analysis
Help me choose the best rates

Figure 9: Screenshot of service pricing displayed in a participant's profile on the webcam platform Streamate.

The pricing structure for video calls presented by Valeria, a 21-year-old Italian OnlyFans creator, on her Telegram channel (see Figure 2. above) vividly illustrates the substantial value of these services, while also reflecting her clear intention to refrain from any unpaid interactions and maintaining boundaries against any inappropriate approaches. Webcam workers, on the other hand, can only prevent unwanted interactions with users by blocking them, a behaviour that can be perceived as unpleasant by other members of the audience and lead to bad reviews. Some OnlyFans

creators even delegate communication responsibilities to agencies specialising in management or resort to spam messages solely to promote content for sale. Nevertheless, the majority of creators interviewed for this study claim to be particularly proud of their commitment to direct communication with fans, emphasising its key role in providing a quality service that distinguishes them from competitors.

The concepts of emotional labor (Hochschild, 1979) and relational labor (Baym, 2015), allow to recognize how the distinct modes of user interaction on OnlyFans and webcam platforms, particularly the contrast between synchronous and asynchronous engagement, underscore a significant shift in the configuration of digital sexual labor stemming from the features of OnlyFans. Webcam models, bound to the real-time dynamics of their live performances, engage in emotional labor to maintain a positive and engaging persona amidst a dynamic and unpredictable audience. According to Hochschild (1979), emotional labor may take two forms: ‘surface acting’; on the one hand, refers to the superficial display of emotions with the individual being aware that the expression of positive feelings does not reflect their inner state; ‘deep acting’, on the other hand, implies workers’ effort to shape their emotional states to match the desired outward display of emotions. Webcam workers appear to engage in both: smiling and responding politely to users may be seen as ‘surface acting’ while a kind of ‘deep acting’ could be identified in internalising heightened sexual arousal or developing a taste for sexual practices that are especially appealing to audiences. In contrast, OnlyFans creators enjoy greater control over their interactions, enabling them to tailor their communication strategies to suit their preferences and goals. However, due to the central evaluation of interactivity in clients’ expectation, testified by the considerable prices for real-time interactions, OnlyFans creators are similarly engaged with emotional labor. Besides, while creators have the opportunity to avoid synchronous interactions (giving them time to manage their emotional states), they need to consistently nurture relationships with their fans over time, by fostering extra-sexual connections, and creating a desirable online persona to encourage subscription renewals to their profiles. This approach, aimed at building a loyal fanbase, differentiates creators’ work from webcam modelling, which is primarily focused on generating immediate revenue through live performances. The intertwining of relational and emotional labor by OnlyFans creators is a comprehensive process that influences their entire professional experience. It goes beyond merely building a fanbase or paid interactions, because it is deeply rooted in the platform’s emphasis on relational dynamics. This constant engagement does not stop with gaining subscribers. It is ingrained in the very fabric of OnlyFans, where the platform's structure and user expectations foster an environment where

relational connections are not just incidental but a central aspect of the work. This framework compels creators to continually engage with their audience, maintaining and deepening connections as a core part of their professional activity. As a result, while webcam models' performance is tied to the synchronicity of their streaming session, creators' work appears more diffused, producing a complex blend of emotional and relational labor further blurring the line between work and leisure time that characterizes digital sex work. In addition, as it has been seen in the previous chapter of the thesis, content creators are compelled to interact on social media platforms, an activity that, while crucial for engagement, is typically unpaid and does not directly correlate with an increase in subscriptions. This aspect of their work highlights the complex reconfiguration of emotional and relational labor in the sex platform economy. Having discussed the implications of different modalities of user interactions, the next section will delve into the perceived differences in engagement strategies and the inherent temporalities of work implied by the two kinds of digital sex work platforms, revealing the contradictions and tensions that arise from these differences, particularly in relation to the participants' claims to freedom and autonomy.

Time management of digital sex workers across platforms

Stella, a 22-year-old Italian digital sex worker active on OnlyFans and popular webcam platforms, offers insights into her contrasting experiences. Initially favouring webcam modelling because of the perceived ease of work due to the lower demand for creative and organisational skills, her account reveals a nuanced relationship between job satisfaction and potential earnings¹⁴.

Working on OnlyFans has fried my brain, really! Because you have to create new content every day, then you have to create something special for public holidays, so you have to think about when it's Valentine's Day, when it's Saint Patrick's Day, when it's Easter and all that stuff. Because I'm not very organised, it's very difficult for me. With the webcam platforms I started with, you could just log on whenever you wanted and you didn't have to find people, you didn't have to plan anything, you just had to be there [laughs]. So for me, live streaming is a little bit better than OnlyFans or something like that, but it pays less.

¹⁴ While webcam platforms charge between 30% and 50% of the performer's income, Onlyfans charges 20%.

Stella vividly describes the pressures involved in consistently producing fresh and unique content, often tailored to different holidays and occasions. Conversely, Stella's account of working on webcam platforms highlights the comparative ease of preparation and scheduling. The immediacy of live-streaming sessions seems to offer a degree of freedom from pre-planning, as one can connect to the platform and find clients without extensive preparation. However, as her reflection continues, the participant's account reveals a layer of complexity, suggesting how the seemingly simple requirement to "just being there" implies the emotional cost of constant availability.

It becomes an illness because the fact that you can stream all the time almost makes you forget that sometimes you need to live, to take care of yourself. Have a shower, a hot bath, things like that. There are days when you have to force yourself to stay offline because otherwise you forget yourself and all you want to do is go to bed. It is easy to fall into depression with these sites. Especially with webcam streaming: when I was working on Strip Chat, I used to spend a lot of hours online without anyone watching me. But you had to be there because a client could have shown up at any time.

Stella's touching outburst highlights the conflict between maintaining a consistent online presence and the need for self-care. The pervasiveness of platform work blurs the line between work and personal life, with potentially detrimental effects on mental well-being. On OnlyFans, this problem does not seem to be very prevalent, mainly due to the asynchronous nature of most interactions and the platform's feature that allows creators to schedule posts in advance. This feature gives creators the autonomy to set their own work schedule, regardless of fluctuations in user traffic. Allison, a 31-year-old Canadian creator, stresses the empowering potential of this feature:

The best innovation on OnlyFans is the calendar for scheduling posts and messages. It's very handy because it allows you to work really smart. I mean, if today I decide to take a month or two off because I want to travel the world, I can earn without doing anything for three months because I have already done everything. OnlyFans has created a fantastic innovation because it allows you to work and choose how much free time you want to take, right? That's one of the things I love most about my job, the fact that it allows me to have free time. It's nice because this thing allows me to cultivate my passions, my relationship with my boyfriend, with my family. I mean, if my mum calls me now and says, "Oh, shall we go for a walk?", "Yeah, just give me a moment. I'll schedule tomorrow's and today's posts and come down. Bye."

The participant's enthusiastic portrayal of the freedom and agency associated with working on OnlyFans resonates with the pleasure-driven and passionate work ethos often portrayed in the

literature on digital sex work. However, when asked directly about her daily commitment in terms of work hours, she reveals a significant disparity between her actual time investment and the conventional expectations of satisfactory employment:

I really have a craving for work, I mean I like it and I spend a lot of time doing it because I like it, so I work an average of 12 hours a day. During the lockdown, I would even work all day because there was nothing to do. You're working, you see the money growing and so you're there, working, working, working... Like an entrepreneur! But now that I have settled down, I work an average of 12 hours a day.

Allison rationalises her extensive online presence through a narrative of genuine passion, while acknowledging the favourable financial outcomes that accompany it. The focus on time management enables to further support the proposed argument about the shifting configuration of emotional and relational labor in platformised sex work. Unlike the more time-bound, hence emotionally intense work of webcam modelling, OnlyFans' features offer an unprecedented degree of flexibility, allowing creators like Allison to freely plan their content distribution and interactions. This flexibility yet is juxtaposed by the challenge of constant engagement and self-promotion. Creators must be both emotionally attuned in their content creation and relational in maintaining audience connections, further demonstrating the blend of emotional and relational labor which shapes their work experience.

A crucial implication is that, when a worker's professional identity becomes deeply intertwined with her personal identity, and success is seen as a direct reflection of subjective value and effort, the flip side emerges - a reluctance to constantly engage in self-promotion can be perceived as a failure, leading to emotional distress. The following account, shared by a 22-year-old creator named Venere, encapsulates the complex nature of digital sex work, a complexity that this chapter has sought to elucidate. The participant aptly emphasises that content creation cannot be compared to conventional employment due to the inherent unpredictability of working hours:

The bad thing is that it's not a job that you take off, it's not a job that you go home and say: "That's it, I've finished my shift so I'm just going to take off my uniform and go home"; you have to do it all the time, you have to do it all the time, and you get anxious about not being active enough. Maybe there are days when you don't feel like it, but then you feel even worse because you haven't posted; posting creates anxiety when it should be a fun thing to do. That's one thing I don't like: being forced. I mean, despite all the freedom I have - because I have so much freedom, maybe too

much! - At the end of the day you have to be there, you have to be present, and you have to be at your best.

Paradoxically, while the participant describes the flexibility of her work as a constraint that deprives her of free time, she subsequently emphasizes the considerable freedom she enjoys ("so much freedom, maybe too much!"). Her observation that posting "should be a fun thing to do" hints at her sense that her anxiety is incongruent with the intended enjoyment. This aspect seems to exemplify the underlying tension present in many participants' narratives. Regardless of their actual working experiences, the ideal of empowerment and enjoyment in digital sex work persists as a reference point that individuals feel compelled to embrace.

A crucial ambivalence thus emerges in workers' perceptions of their work experience. Although their narratives strongly emphasise a sense of autonomy and emancipation associated with digital sex work, when asked about the material organisation of their work, it becomes clear that the amount of time and energy devoted to managing their profiles is indeed high, often significantly exceeding that of a typical employed position. As recounted by Lily, a 31-year-old Italian creator:

At first, I was so excited about being able to earn money selling nudes. It was just fantastic! Before starting to sell nude photos and do porn and so on, I had financial difficulties; so, when I started earning with my content, it was a relief, and I could dedicate 40 or 50 hours a week to it. But there came a point where I started to feel exhausted, and I realized that it was a real job precisely because I felt that way. Apparently, I had to be exhausted to understand that it was a real job, a true employment, something professional, and not a hobby or something like that.

Lily's reflection emphasises the initial enthusiasm and financial relief that drove her to dedicate a substantial amount of time to digital sex work. However, her subsequent realization of exhaustion and consequent acknowledgment of her activity as a 'real job' reveals, alike previous accounts, the complexity of participants' perspectives on their work, swinging from narratives of freedom to anecdotes of burnout. Unlike webcam models who directly monetise real-time user interactions, OnlyFans creators enjoy the flexibility to plan their content releases well in advance, often over several months. This organisational autonomy gives them considerable control over their work schedules. However, as the participants' accounts made clear, this flexibility comes with its own set of challenges. The relentless pursuit of self-promotion on social media platforms forces creators to constantly engage with their audiences in order to maintain visibility and income, exemplifying the dynamics of relational labor (Baym, 2015) associated with the sector. While OnlyFans offers greater control over

the timing of content, creators are simultaneously tied to the demands of self-marketing, highlighting the complex interplay between temporal autonomy and the ongoing negotiation between organisational freedom and individualised promotional responsibility within the ecology of platforms.

Through ethnographic shreds on evidence on creators' lived experiences, this discussion has been tried to unveil the demanding nature of working on OnlyFans, in apparent contradictions with initial impressions of participants themselves. Building a career as adult content creator, in fact, requires a combination of organizational skills, communicative and relational abilities, creativity, and digital competencies. The following and conclusive sections will broaden the discussion to deal with the work subjectivity emerging from sex workers' embeddedness with the unique socio-technical infrastructure of OnlyFans: first by exploring the skill set commonly recognized by participants as essential for involvement in this field, which suggests a shared consensus over the characterization of this professional role; and then the overall work perceptions in terms of wellbeing.

The social construction of professionalism in OnlyFans adult content creation

In one of the final sections of the interview, participants were prompted to reflect on the essential skills they considered necessary for success in the field, imagining a scenario in which a newcomer sought their advice on how to start working in the digital sex industry. In earlier parts of the interview, participants repeatedly emphasised their genuine inclination towards sexualised performances, framing their work as a more spontaneous expression linked to their personalities. However, explicit questions about the specific skills perceived to be required brought out clear views about the competencies associated with professionalised adult content production, which were often not as clearly articulated in the rest of their narratives.

Among the predominant themes that emerged from the participants' accounts, the importance of being aware of the potential long-term effects of their activities and the responsible use of strategies to ensure personal safety in the field became evident. One of the most commonly adopted strategies is the use of geographical restrictions, enabled by most adult platforms' affordances. This aspect acquires particular importance for sex workers with family responsibilities, as seen in the case of Kat, an American webcam model:

I actually have my state blocked because I'm a parent. I don't want any of the other parents to find me, even though I'm on an adult site. So I do have a geo blocker for the state of Michigan and that

makes me feel a little like I can go to the grocery store and not be looked at and not having people like: "Oh, I have seen your vagina before!" [laugh]. You know, I think that because of the boundaries and rules that I made for myself before I started, it's been very easy. I personally haven't had any issues. I'm not worried about my child finding any of my stuff because, like, again, I keep everything on adult sites, so it's like: "I'm an adult, you're an adult. We're both here". So I've never had any safety concerns because I've always kept them [professional and private spheres] so separate.

Remarkably, the privacy management associated with “keeping everything on adult sites” can be hardly achieved by OnlyFans content creators because of the visibility advantages of using mainstream social media for self-promotion, as it was underlined in the previous section on content accessibility. Creators could attempt to develop anonymous social media profiles exclusively for promoting their OnlyFans, but platforms’ ability to identify accounts of the same user can pose the risk of context collapse, as occurred to Martic, a 19-years old Italian creator:

People started to find my personal Instagram, cause, you know, when you use multiple accounts on your phone, I guess it recommends people, you know? [...] I didn't know about this until later, and then I was like: “Oh shit, I should have imagined that”. So when people started sending me messages on my private account, I got scared and deleted the account cause I didn't wanna mix the two [spheres] and I didn't want [pause], I don't know, I didn't want any problems, basically.

In line with the general stream of their accounts and the peculiar work ethos progressively associated with the digital sex industry nowadays (Bernstein, 2007, 2020; Sanders et al., 2018), another common theme emphasised the need to have an innate drive for sexual exploration. Interestingly, Ursula articulates this aspect as a full-fledged professional vocation:

To do this job, you need to believe in it, you need to enjoy it, you need to genuinely like sex, and you need to know about sex, do you know what I mean? Basically, you can't be disgusted by anything in the sexual sphere because, otherwise, you're not a real sex worker; you're essentially just someone who doesn't know what to do to make some money and jumps into the world of explicit content. Now, a sex worker who doesn't know [pause] how to have sex [emphatic and ironic tone] or doesn't know how to give a good blowjob or can't even talk [emphasis] about sex, well, that is not really experienced with everything related to the sexual sphere – for instance, if someone is scandalized by a request for some kind of fetish content - they should just find another job. In my opinion, OnlyFans is an environment full of many people who don't really know what they're doing.

Such rhetoric of authenticity extends beyond the sexual sphere, often accompanied by the idea that a creator should be motivated to put their whole subjectivity on the line for the sake of a seemingly authentic performance that stands out from the competition. While many participants emphasized the importance of community building to garner support and guidance from more experienced creators, the idea of taking inspiration from other creators' content is described as decisively deceitful, as advocated by Rose, a French creator in her 30s:

The most terrible thing you can do is just take and copy another creator: that's awful. It's terrible for yourself and for the audience because, of course, they notice that what you're doing is so fake.

Additionally, the self-entrepreneurial ethos characterizing this field is revealed by a strong emphasis on hard work. Beatrice, a well-known Italian creator who joined OnlyFans as her first experience in the job market, articulated this aspect in rather strong tones:

The only advice I can give is: "Roll up your sleeves and work. I mean, nothing here is for free, and nothing is easy". Above all, the most importance advice I can give is: "Get it out of your mind that you can make easy money. In any field, you will only succeed if you work hard and work well: if you are, let's say, a cashier in a supermarket, you can become the manager of that supermarket, of all the supermarkets. It just depends on how much you want it and the effort you put into it. So that's my advice: "Get up and work".

The participants' perspective underscores a prevailing individualistic narrative of hard work as a key determinant of success. However, it also presents a potentially simplistic and misleading representation of adult content creation. Such representation clashes with the reality of various entry barriers limiting access to digital sex work to underprivileged social actors. One could even question the apparent contradiction between ideals of authenticity and the hard work of character building. Nevertheless, as explored throughout the general discussion, ambivalent tensions appear to be at the core of OnlyFans creators' identity narratives. This account, hence, exemplifies the contradictions inherent in creators' perceptions of authenticity and success, emphasizing the multifaceted nature of their experiences.

Participants also stressed the importance of creativity and uniqueness while being open to possible criticism or rejection from the audience. In addition, much attention was paid to practical promotional strategies to succeed in a competitive environment, highlighting the importance of

informal knowledge-making to navigate the often-opaque rules of platforms, a topic explored in the following chapter of this dissertation.

Finally, most participants advised aspiring individuals to be aware of the emotional labor involved in digital sex work, as eloquently expressed by Eugenie:

I always say that as a sex worker, I am a social worker, just because sex is something so personal that you have to understand the customer just in order to make good content, and you have to [pause] listen to them. [...] Maybe sometimes it's way to personal, but it's good for me, it feels good taking care of people like that. Yeah, it's a fun way to take care of people [laugh]. So, someone wants to start an OnlyFans, I would tell them that they have to be prepared that it will be... Yeah, social work too. They will have to be prepared to hear people being sad, being alone, 'cause [pause] yeah, most customers are sad people and lonely people, so yeah, you have to be prepared to have people crying on your virtual shoulder.

The analogy drawn by the participant, referring to sex work as a form of social work, highlights the ubiquity of emotional labor (Hochschild, 1979) in the lived experiences of adult content creators. The account also reveals various key insights. First, the emphasis on the necessity to understanding the customer in order to create valuable content underscores a conception of professionalism framed as involving the development meaningful inter-subjective connections with clients in order to provide a good quality service. While this view seems akin to that previously expressed by Serena¹⁵ about getting into each client's mindset in order to set the content prices in relation to their perceived expectation, the crucial difference is that while Serena's emotional labor is strictly goal oriented, namely increasing monetization opportunities, from Eugenie's account, it appears that the final outcome is the quality of content itself. Moreover, the portray of interpersonal relations with users as having "people crying on your virtual shoulder" suggest the importance of non-sexual engagement in digital sex work, which seems to be reconfigured in a way that is very much akin to care work. Nevertheless, while digital sex work on OnlyFans is described as a service dealing with sensitivity and deep and profound emotional engagement, that a potential newcomer would "have to be prepared"

¹⁵ See page 13 (subsection about content accessibility).

to experience, this representation is counterbalanced by the prevalent rhetoric of playfulness and genuine enjoyment emerging from the comment that "it's a fun way to take care of people".

The next and conclusive section of the discussion of findings will explore participants' perceptions of their overall professional well-being.

Job satisfaction and well-being of adult content creators

Upon being invited to share their overall professional satisfaction, participants revealed a range of both positive and negative aspects of their work. While nuanced perspectives are prevalent across various professional domains, the insights provided by adult content creators shed valuable light on the evolving landscape of platform-based sex work. Regarding the positive aspects, participants' accounts coalesce around several recurring themes: a sense of personal growth and empowerment linked to their work identity, a view of their involvement in the sex industry as facilitating a meaningful journey of sexual expression and exploration, a firm sense of autonomy stemming from self-entrepreneurship, and most notably, the opportunity to contribute to a societal shift by offering an alternative to mainstream pornography, which purportedly promotes a more open-minded approach to sexuality amidst the growing societal visibility of platforms like OnlyFans.

Empowering narratives

Self-improvement through digital sexual labor

Participants often linked their involvement in the sex industry with a positive impact on their self-perception, particularly through increased self-esteem stemming from online visibility. In Martic's words:

I think the best part is that this work is constant ego boost: people telling me I'm beautiful, I'm sexy and so on. Just because I was not always very confident about my body; as I said to you, I'm not thin, I'm a bit chabby and it was the main problem in my personal life. Yeah, making porn makes me so confident, and so confident as a woman just because I had the power on men they were customers and I felt a bit like superior to them. And it was the first time in my life that as a woman I felt so good and so confident. So yeah, that's definitely the best part, the ego boost [laugh].

This element, consistently reported by all participants, often stemmed from past experiences of discomfort with body features that did not conform to mainstream ideals of beauty. As a result, involvement in the digital sex industry was associated with perceptions of improved body image and increased self-confidence.

Yet, it is interesting to note that for some, such as Eugenie, the monetisation of sexualised performance was also seen as empowering in terms of gender identity, due to the positive power asymmetry perceived towards paying clients, who not coincidentally are all men. Notably, this consideration seems to overturn the reverse power asymmetry conventionally conceived in the relationship between sex workers and clients in offline contexts (Campbell et al., 2018). However, other participants, such as Peach, took a harsher view of this apparent empowerment:

You know that they're gonna see you as bitch but, after all, you still kind of have the control. Like, at the end of the day you are still their employee or whatever, but being a dom feels better if you don't wanna, you know, be subjugated by the patriarchy in all levels of the dynamic, right?

Remarkably, such perceptions of power over clients vary greatly depending on the specific segment of adult content production in which the individual is involved. While Peach expresses some scepticism about a possible reversal of power dynamics, she admits that embodying a professional dominatrix role partly compensates for the fact that sex work has historically been deeply embedded in unequal gender relations. However, this perception changes significantly when moving into more mainstream services of digital sex work, such as the so-called 'girlfriend experience', as Stella explains in the following account:

Obviously, people also treat you in a weird way, unless you do femdom stuff, which I don't like because I'm not a dominatrix, that's really not my cup of tea [laughs], it's not me. Unless you do that kind of stuff, people tend treat you a bit like a submissive.

Nevertheless, many emphasised that the very fact of making explicit women's erotic capital (Hakim, 2010) as a quantifiable, monetizable asset was perceived as empowering, as Margot, a content creator in her early twenties, cynically points out:

Many, in my opinion, think that this [i.e., working on OnlyFans] is like selling yourself, but I feel like every day people want to buy me: that is, when I'm on the street and someone says, 'Hi beautiful,' I'd rather prefer them to say, 'Hi beautiful, I offer you 600€,' that'd seem more serious

to me. At least you recognize my value. To me, the 'Hi beautiful' on the street is definitely worse than 'Do you want 600€ for a night in a hotel?'¹⁶ Really. I mean, it's almost more objectifying that you catcall me than if you say, 'I recognize that you have value,' because either way, you're treating me like an object, but at least you're treating me like a luxury vase and not like an ashtray.

Margot's perception aligns poignantly with Jarrett's (2022) argument about subject agency, which crucially distinguishes assetization from self-commodification in the context of digital sex work. This tension between a perceived increase in self-esteem and a sense of discomfort with wider cultural implications for the representation of gender roles is countered by another prevalent pattern in participants' narratives. Indeed, in many accounts, such an increase in self-confidence was directly linked to a genuine sense of satisfaction associated with the, often somewhat idealised, perception of being able to guide the user's path of sexual exploration and satisfy their emotional needs, thus contributing to a transformative path of sexual discovery and exploration through supposedly authentic performances and intimate, disintermediated interactions. In other words, being an amateur content creator is repeatedly idealised as facilitating clients' liberating journeys, as Angela passionately points out:

The thing I like the most is the relationship with people: being able to respond to every client, stay in touch with each other every day, talk, vent, and be a support for people who really need it. And I also love being a friend to people who feel a bit lonely in the realm of sex, because, you know, there are so many people who are the only ones in the family with these inclinations and they come to me saying they feel misunderstood and excluded, maybe even by their friends. So, they really find comfort with me, with my open-mindedness and my way of thinking, so taking that comfort away from them would be really bad, just terrible. As if I suddenly had to stop going to psychotherapy. You know, very often it's all about this, not just the sexual performance.

It can therefore be seen that the idealisation of intimacy that characterises the OnlyFans environment is not exclusive to the clients, but also to the workers themselves, and can be experienced as mutually pleasurable. However, while most of the participants, when reflecting on their well-being at work, mentioned the above-mentioned subjective and more, let's say, immaterial benefits of their work (increase in self-esteem, path to sexual discovery, feeling helpful to others) as relevant, most of

¹⁶ Despite this explicit reference to or indoor in-person sex work, the participant frequently stressed throughout the interview that she would not work in other segments of the sex industry but OnlyFans.

the emphasis remained on the material and organisational benefits, showing a manifest embrace of self-entrepreneurial ideals.

The evolving positioning of sex workers in digital landscapes: from hustling to entrepreneurship

As might be expected, almost all but two of the participants emphasised that the earning potential and organisational flexibility gained through digital sex work were the most important factors contributing to job satisfaction. Venere, a creator who joined OnlyFans shortly after graduating from high school and working briefly as a full-time waitress in a restaurant, echoed this perspective.

The thing I like the most is definitely that I can organize my schedule as I prefer - namely working hours and days, and so on -. And certainly, the best is that you can start working not too early: you know what I mean, if I want to wake up at 10:00, it's absolutely fine. Plus, I don't waste maybe that half-hour or so that I would waste going to work and then coming back. So, in any case, it makes you save a lot of time. [...] It's much more convenient than another job, indeed: at the end of the day, you work from home, you can do it wherever you prefer, and certainly, you're not exploited - something I remember in comparison to when I worked in a restaurant [is that], unfortunately, the salaries never come close to what you could manage to earn with OnlyFans.

Participants' appreciation of the flexibility to organise their schedules, choose their preferred hours and locations, and avoid the constraints of a fixed work routine highlights a broader transformation of work in post-industrial society. This shift is particularly accelerated by the rise of the digital economy, where remote and flexible working arrangements are redefining traditional notions of employment. In Venere's account, the contrast between working in a restaurant and the freedom experienced on platforms such as OnlyFans underscores the evolving dynamics of contemporary work, highlighting flexibility and agency as crucial factors in the contemporary social construction of job satisfaction (Gregg, 2013). In line with these broader shifts in cultural representations of work, while practical considerations were certainly relevant, the empowering entrepreneurial rhetoric of 'being your own boss' emerged as a dominant theme in their narratives. The following account from an interview with Litz, a successful American creator in her thirties, exemplifies such a widespread attitude:

There's a lot of things that I really like about it. I love the creative expression, but most of all I love being able to be my own boss and do whatever I want to do with it. This is why I really like this job.

As well as being an example of the entrepreneurial spirit at the heart of the creators' views, the account further demonstrates the pervasiveness of passion and genuine self-commitment in shaping their self-ethos, which emerged from most of this research's findings.

The flip side of the coin: workload fatigue, precarity and social invisibility

It has been discussed throughout the chapter, participant's views of their jobs are shaped by marked ambivalence between a sense of empowerment and precarity.

All creators interviewed expressed frustration with the limited social recognition and prevailing social stigma associated with sex work. This contrasts with recent literature (Hamilton et al., 2022) that suggests a growing trend towards the mainstreaming of sex work facilitated by patronage platforms. Another common concern was the precariousness arising from the lack of regulation and limited rights of sex workers in most countries, with Denmark being the notable exception¹⁷. This sense of precarity is further exacerbated by the dynamic nature of both the technical and regulatory aspects of platforms (Poell et al., 2021). OnlyFans' well-documented attempt to restrict adult content and the systematic targeting of sex workers by social media content moderation (Are & Paasonen, 2021) serve as stark examples of this trend. As OnlyFans creators are inherently reliant on social media for promotion, instances of content shadow banning or profile removal (experiences recounted by most participants) result in significant income fluctuations, hindering their ability to pursue long-term endeavours.

However, the most striking tension lies in the contradiction between the perceived freedom and independence associated with OnlyFans work and the reality of the time and energy investment required. As discussed in the section on the temporality of digital sex work, participants' work permeates their daily lives, facilitated by the intermediation of digital technologies. This pervasiveness is often justified through narratives of passion and commitment yet is driven by the pragmatic awareness that consistent online activity is essential to maintain visibility and monetization opportunities. This issue is further compounded by a process of progressive identification with the

¹⁷ It is noteworthy, however, that the two participants living in Denmark had migrant backgrounds, which raised similar issues for them.

professional role as content creator, prevalent among participants, which leads to a sense of objectification that deeply affects self-esteem. Stella's statement exemplifies this:

I realize that this work makes me perceive myself as somewhat objectified. I mean, on OnlyFans, you become your own product, and if this product is suddenly no longer in the spotlight, you perceive it as a personal failure that undermines your self-esteem, inevitably affecting your daily life and personal relationships. For instance, when I fear that my content will no longer engage, I become more easily irritable with my boyfriend.

While it would be naive to neglect the potential for work dynamics to impact the private sphere for any kind of job, particularly for self-employed individuals, the perceived objectification highlighted by Stella adds a layer of complexity. This could be considered a counterpoint to Jarrett's (2022) emphasis on agency in her theory of assetization. However, the argument presented through the ethnographic evidence presented throughout this discussion aims to emphasize the nuanced nature of content creators' subjectivities. It suggests that empowerment and oppression can coexist, and that this apparent contradiction is precisely what characterizes OnlyFans creators' liminal positioning in the platform economy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has attempted to provide a comprehensive analysis of the reconfiguration of the emotional dimension of sexual labor taking place in the context of digital patronage platforms, using adult content creation on OnlyFans as an example of this transformation. Through comparisons between sex work on OnlyFans and adult webcam modelling on dedicated platforms, it has been shown how different platform configurations and business models shape the labor experiences of digital sex workers who engage with them. While the services provided by workers in both sectors are underpinned by interpersonal interactions with users, the way in which such interactions are experienced by workers varies according to the specific affordances provided by the technological infrastructure of the respective platform models, which has significant implication for the emotional and relational labors involved. The main distinction identified in this sense relates to the synchronicity of interactions - live streaming in the case of webcam models and asynchronous engagement on OnlyFans. The analysis has differentiated the labor dynamics on webcam platforms and OnlyFans. While webcam modelling primarily involves emotional labor, as defined by Hochschild (1979), through real-time interactions in chat rooms and private sessions, OnlyFans work uniquely

combines both emotional Hochschild (1979) and relational (Baym, 2015) forms of labor. OnlyFans creators engage in emotional labor through their content and interactions, while also investing significantly in relational labor to build and maintain their subscriber base. They do so by distributing free content on social media platforms to convert followers into paying subscribers on their exclusive pages. This blend is distinctive to OnlyFans, where creators navigate both immediate emotional engagement and the long-term cultivation of audience relationships.

Participants' narratives reveal a somewhat common definition of what it means to be a 'good' creator, particularly in terms of a certain set of skills that are considered necessary. These narratives point to a somewhat contradictory overlap of opposing perceptions of the skills and attitudes necessary to be successful on OnlyFans. On the one hand, spontaneity and playfulness were emphasised, while on the other hand, the same participants emphasised a high degree of professionalism in marketing and relationship work. There was also consensus on the entrepreneurial perception of content creation as a job where success depends directly on self-commitment, revealing an individualistic stance that does not take into account the context and influence of the infrastructure itself.

It has been seen that the importance of relational dimensions compels OnlyFans creators to fully embed their personalities into their digital personas. This leads to a deep identification with their professional roles, often articulated through narratives of authentic passion and vocation. Yet, some contradictions emerged. The overt celebration of the unprecedented freedom and flexibility in time management is countered by the frustration of unpredictable working hours, blurred boundaries between work and home, and the inherent precariousness of income fluctuations. Thus, while it was said that this form of work allows for a great deal of freedom in the organisation of working time, it was also clear that the pressures of competition require a substantial investment of time and energy, often beyond that required in standard jobs. Moreover, the blurring of boundaries between professional and personal identities - where 'you become your product' - turns what initially appears to be an alternative to conventional work into a potentially more demanding commitment than regular employment. Such a dynamic reveals a remarkable ambivalence towards their profession.

As a result of OnlyFans' focus on genuine emotional and relational connection, the work subjectivity of its creators is uniquely molded by the overlap of professional and personal life. This is evidenced by the tendency of creators to incorporate their personal interests, such as cosplay, fitness

or gaming, into their self-presentation. These personal elements not only enrich their digital personas, but also blur the lines between their professional and personal selves. Creators use these interests to connect more deeply with their audiences, further intertwining their work with aspects of their personal lives. This blending of work and leisure not only shapes their online personas but also brings about a nuanced ambivalence towards their activities being classified as 'work.' This ambivalence is a recurrent theme in the narratives of the participants, reflecting the complex dynamics where personal interests become integral to their professional identity. It illustrates the intricate interplay between personal identity and professional role to meet the demands for authenticity in the platformized sex work landscape. However, with workers' professional roles so closely intertwined with their subjectivities, the emphasis on empowerment may function as a kind of defensive mechanism to assert their agency against the precariousness of the platform economy, shaped by the ever-evolving affordances of different platforms, which can change abruptly and unpredictably, as well as shifting audience preferences, trends, and practices in digital adult content consumption.

Thus, the subjectivity emerging from OnlyFans work is essentially shaped by a set of contradictions: while the lived work experience is narrated as empowering and liberating, it is often experienced as overbearing. Work identity is described as a natural extension of the creator's personal inclinations, yet there is also a strong emphasis on the need to develop specific skills for success. Narratives of success emphasize hard work and self-commitment, but underlying these is the expectation that mere hard work is not sufficient; it must also be genuinely enjoyed.

Conclusions

This research sought to frame the distinctive form of digital sex labor on OnlyFans. It posited the liminal positioning of adult content creators' labor between amateur pornography, digital sex work, and social media influencing. The literature review chapter first traced the gradual integration of digital technologies and platforms into broader configurations of work, particularly focusing on the fields of sex work and pornography. It then proposed bridging these areas of scholarly inquiry, previously developed separately, as the purpose of this original contribution. This theoretical section, aimed at highlighting the relevance of the research topic in addressing gaps in existing literature, was followed by a methodological chapter. This chapter presented the broad ethnographic framework of the immersive fieldwork conducted on the platform, introducing an original approach to platform ethnography that combined traditional qualitative techniques (i.e., semi-structured interviewing, ethnographic content analysis, document analysis) with digital methods (i.e., walkthrough and cross-platform analysis).

To frame the emerging configuration of labor produced by sex workers' engagement with OnlyFans, each empirical chapter explored different aspects of the work of adult content creators. This exploration was based on the lived experiences of participants involved in the research and a cross-platform analysis of the promotional activities on Instagram and TikTok of a broader sample of OnlyFans creators.

Two chapters¹⁸ of the thesis framed the distinctiveness of adult content creation on OnlyFans through comparisons with adult webcam modelling on dedicated platforms, to demonstrate how

¹⁸ Namely "Chapter 3. Monetizing relationships. OnlyFans and the re-socialization of economic transactions", and "Chapter 5. The work subjectivity of OnlyFans adult content creators. The intertwining of emotional and relational labour in platformized sex work"

different platform configurations and business models shape the labor experiences of digital sex workers who engage with them and show the unique configuration of sexual labor produced by OnlyFans.

The first empirical chapter¹⁹ suggested a process of mainstreaming sex work, attributable to OnlyFans' appeal to an extremely heterogeneous workforce and its integration of a range of pre-existing digital sexual services within a unified platform environment. Moreover, OnlyFans' approach to monetizing social relationships was framed as the major innovation introduced by the platform in the realm of digital sex work. It was argued that the overt economic valorisation of social interactions on OnlyFans represents a re-socialization of economic elements in social relations, fully embedding the platform's socio-technical infrastructure.

The subsequent chapter²⁰ focused on another key dimension of the work of OnlyFans adult content creators, namely self-branding. The absence of an algorithmic recommendation system within the platform compelled creators to monetize a popularity achieved elsewhere. As explained throughout the chapter, access to profiles on the platform is only possible through direct links, forcing creators to cultivate their fan base through social media platforms. The concept of cross-platform dependency by design was introduced, to stress the fact that, because of the platform's design and the impossibility of achieving success without a pre-existing fanbase, content creators have to promote themselves on several other platforms, such as mainstream social media, and drive followers to OnlyFans through an often intricate path. Therefore, content creators are inevitably dependent on different platforms, both the one they receive their income from and the ones they have to employ for marketing. This interdependence applies not only to content creators but also, regarding the digital sex work market, to the platforms themselves.

As a consequence, in addition to the work of creating explicit content and interacting with 'fans' within the platform, there is the additional work of self-promotion. This requires particular creativity and organizational skills, as not only do creators have to meet the demands of constantly updating the

¹⁹ Chapter 3. Monetizing relationships. OnlyFans and the re-socialization of economic transactions.

²⁰ Chapter 4. Cross-platform dependency by design. Self branding labour of OnlyFans creators across hostile social media ecosystems

aesthetics of subscription content to keep up with popular trends, but in order to gain visibility in such a competitive environment, they have to produce a different kind of content for each of the platforms on which they promote their profiles.

The discussion thus explored how OnlyFans creators promote themselves across social media platforms, considering various aspects such as the main platforms used, the subjective imaginaries associated with each of them, strategic navigation of content moderation policies, and the adaptation of self-branding strategies to different social media vernaculars and content moderation policies. The findings reveal that the key to successful multi-platform branding, essential for building a career on OnlyFans, lies in the ability to strategically combine explicit with non-explicit elements in creators' construction of their digital personas, and position oneself within particular niche markets. However, even after achieving considerable online visibility, the effort to convert social media followers into paid subscribers entails the development of cross-platform embedding through an intricate maze of link connections from social media to OnlyFans profiles. A critical point is that due to OnlyFans' design, which does not allow for other forms of visibility building, creators must promote themselves on other platforms, leading to a dependency on multiple platforms for visibility and income.

The descriptive analyzes presented in the chapter aimed to support the development of the concept of 'cross-platform dependency by design' to frame this essential aspect of creators' work experience. In order to work through and for OnlyFans, a creator needs to successfully engage with other platforms, which means being able to adapt to the specific aesthetics, vernaculars (Gibbs et al., 2015), and guidelines of many different platform environments. As a result, somewhat paradoxically, creators invest more resources in other platforms than in the one where they actually work. This inevitably affects the ability of creators to protect their privacy. Like webcam platforms, OnlyFans allows for geographical restrictions on access to content. However, the need to participate across multiple digital landscapes definitely hampers creators' control over content accessibility. Moreover, the visibility of content on social platforms is determined by algorithms. These algorithms, which are often opaque and constantly updated, vary from platform to platform. In the same way that webcam models try to decipher the platform-specific algorithmic logic that governs the visibility of their homepage, OnlyFans creators appear to be untouched by algorithms due to the lack of an internal recommendation system on the platform itself. However, the need to attract fans from social media leads them to engage extensively with algorithms on all platforms where they are active for promotional purposes. In essence, while webcam models seem to have a closer relationship with

algorithms due to their interface with a specific, albeit constantly evolving, platform algorithm, OnlyFans creators engage with algorithms across platforms for self-promotion due to the lack of an internal recommendation algorithm on their primary platform.

The key implication, in this sense, is that while the main site of labor for webcam models is constituted by the webcam platforms themselves, content creators are forced to exploit a broad ecosystem of platforms in order to successfully engage with OnlyFans. Paradoxically, despite only having a financial relationship with OnlyFans, workers' considerable efforts are invested in unpaid digital labor on other platforms, exemplifying the infrastructural ecology at the heart of platformization (Poell et al., 2021). This aspect suggests the need for an original framework that recognizes the role of OnlyFans creators at the intersection of the gig and creative economies, and as both platform workers (Van Doorn, 2017; Gandini, 2019), in terms of a financial relationship with a digital platform, and digital workers (Terranova, 2000; Gandini, 2021), freely producing content that generates revenue for social media platforms. An outcome of the process is an unprecedented overlapping of sex work and social media platforms.

The final empirical chapter²¹ explored the blend of emotional (Hochschild, 1979) and relational (Baym, 2015) labor characterizing the work experiences of OnlyFans adult content creators. The discussion sought to understand how the platform's socio-technical infrastructure shapes the emotional dimension of work, how content creators navigate the interplay between emotional (Hochschild, 1979) and relational (Baym, 2015) labor, and how the platform environment shapes the work identity and subjectivity of OnlyFans sex workers. The discussion suggested that their work subjectivity is characterized by the ambivalence resulting from a blend of empowerment and precarity, an overlap of work and leisure, and contradictory stances, where narratives of authentic vocation for the job are challenged by an emphasis on the savviness required. In fact, OnlyFans creators must learn to navigate a complex and constantly evolving landscape shaped by the specific visibility regimes of different platforms, the perceived expectations of their audience, and constantly develop strategies to remain competitive in an increasingly saturated market. This depends on a complex combination of strategic practices and unpredictable factors (including a bit of luck), unless the creator enjoys a prior

²¹ "Chapter 5. The work subjectivity of OnlyFans adult content creators. The intertwinement of emotional and relational labour in platformized sex work"

condition of privilege (understood in this context as pre-existing online popularity), such as well-known influencers and mainstream celebrities. Consequently, the possibility of successfully engaging with OnlyFans depends on subjective and exogenous elements. Nevertheless, the participants' narratives reveal a marked individualistic ethos denying the influence of structural forces.

Throughout the research, several key directions for future research have emerged, each of which extends the scope of the current study and opens avenues for deeper understanding and analysis of the evolving dynamics of the digital sex work industry. An important area of interest is the monetisation of social relations in the platform economy. Although this thesis focuses primarily on the micro-level, subjective experiences of social actors, it also points to the need for a broader analysis of political economy. There's an urgent need to explore how platformization is transforming the economic dimensions of social relations. Such an exploration, within the framework of political economy, would go beyond individualised experiences to a broader, macro-level analysis.

Another important aspect is the individualised experiences and structural challenges faced in digital sex work. The thesis highlights the individualised nature of sex workers' labor experiences on platforms such as OnlyFans, where they face challenges arising from structural elements such as precariousness and the effects of content moderation. This situation creates a complex web of infrastructural dependency and exclusion. Despite these challenges, OnlyFans workers develop creative strategies to navigate these precarious ecosystems and adapt to a constantly evolving landscape. These individual responses to structural problems present an interesting area for further research, particularly in exploring potential forms of collective resistance and solidarity among these workers.

In addition, understanding digital sex work in non-Western is crucial. It's important to explore how the experiences of digital sex workers unfold various geographical contexts, especially in areas where this work is legally and socially stigmatised, sometimes leading to severe consequences such as the imprisonment of content creators. A comprehensive understanding of these dynamics in different cultural and legal contexts would greatly enhance our understanding of the global landscape of digital sex work.

Finally, a gender-focused approach is essential to grasp the varying experiences in the digital sex work sector among individuals identifying as male, female, queer and non-binary. This perspective

would illuminate the nuanced ways in which gender identity intersects with the challenges and experiences of digital sex workers, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted challenges of the sex platform economy.

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Appendix

Interview guide

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. My name is Margherita Di Cicco, I am a PhD candidate at the University of Milan. As you may already know, the purpose of my research is to understand how sex work is being intermediated by digital platforms. In other words, how internet technologies may influence work practices, according to the subjective experiences of sex workers directly involved. For this, I am looking at different and valuable points of view, like yours.

Here are the questions, please try to give a comprehensive answer. There is no word limit, in fact you are encouraged to write as much as you can, and to deviate from the question to propose your argument or follow your reasoning. I am interested in your own personal experience, so there are no right or wrong answers. You might draw from your own experience with concrete examples as well as general insights you feel you might have about online sex work – ideally both.

Of course, if there are any questions that you feel uncomfortable with answering, please know that you can skip them. Your answers will be anonymised and securely stored on my device. You may withdraw from the interview at any time.

So, let us begin!

Background and beginning of career in the sex industry

How did you begin to engage with the sex industry?

Before getting involved, did you seek information about it online or elsewhere?

What, if any, websites, or platforms did you use for your work?

How did you build your fanbase?

Did you experience any technical or legal issues? If so, would you like to tell me what happened, and how did you deal with that?

What, if any, safety measures you employed to protect your personal identity?

What kind of services do you currently provide to your customers?

Do you feel that you developed a somewhat different character related to your work? If so, would you like to tell me more about it?

Is there any source of inspiration for the aesthetics of your performance (such as media culture, cosplaying, social media profiles, etc)?

The adult industry is known to be a highly competitive market. How do you differentiate your product/services?

Technical aspects

Where do you normally carry out your work?

How do you get ready for a session or a shooting?

How do you prepare the setting for a session or a shooting?

What devices, if any, do you normally use for your work?

Did you buy any additional devices or tools for work purposes?

Do you work by yourself or also with others?

Work organization

How do you organize your working schedule (for instance, do you set delimited working days or working hours)?

Beside the sexual service or performance, are there other tasks involved in this job?

How many hours a day do you normally dedicate to your work?

How do you keep boundaries between your professional and private times and spaces?

Is this your main source of income, or do you carry out one or more other jobs as well? If so, how do you reconcile these activities?

Social media

Would you like to explain me what social media do you use, and for what purpose do you use each of them?

Do you seek to attract new clients and/or followers? How?

Do you engage with other sex workers and/or digital content creators? How?

Are there any marketing strategies that you employ? Would you like to tell me about it?

Do you have an Amazon Wishlist? If so, what kind of products are there? Do you see these products as somewhat informative of your personality?

Have you ever experienced any issues concerning content moderation, such as shadow banning, content removed, and so on? Would you like to tell me about your experience regarding that?

Relational work

How do you interact with your clients and/or followers?

Do you experience any emotional exchanges with your clients and/or followers? Would you like to tell me a bit about this relational aspect of your work?

How do you think your clients and/or followers see you, and what they expect from you?

What do you see as a boundary that a client and/or a follower should not cross?

What do you do to prevent inappropriate behaviour from them?

Closing questions

Did you heard about Onlyfans announcement to ban explicit content from the platform? How did you react to that?

Would you like to tell me one or a few things that you particularly like about your work?

What about one or a few things that you particularly dislike about it?

Do you see yourself continuing to do this job in the future?

If a person interested to get involved with the sex industry came to you for advice, what would you suggest to them?

Is there anything else you would like to add that you think might be relevant? This could be comments, observations, or anything that comes to mind and did not fit in the previous questions.

Do you know other sex workers, porn artists or content creators who would be willing to contribute my study? If so, would you mind sharing my contact with them?

For privacy protection, all respondents' names are covered with pseudonyms. Is there a name that you would like me to use to refer to your case?

Finally, would you please list your:

- 1) Age
- 2) Gender
- 3) Education
- 4) Nationality