

# 10 Digital Sex Work?

## Creating and Selling Explicit Content in OnlyFans

*Daniel Cardoso, Despina Chronaki and  
Cosimo Marco Scarcelli*

### Introduction

Despite a long and complex media studies tradition of analyses of media uses, those media uses have often been reduced to media effects (assumed to be either positive or negative) (Attwood et al., 2018)<sup>1</sup>. Into this framework, when we focus on young people or emerging adults, media effects are frequently connected to sex and sexuality, and sexual(ised) media are often framed in terms of empowerment or victimisation. Moreover, research and social action focuses on protection from a risk averse culture which assumes that users are proactive but still somehow lacking in their competence. The situation that we have just painted has been made more complex by the COVID-19 pandemic that also affected the performance of the sexual self in offline and online environments. Focusing on platforms, it is interesting to consider that the Match Group (owner of platforms like Tinder) stock value rose rapidly from March to September 2020 and has kept relatively high prices ever since. Even once relatively unknown platforms, like OnlyFans, have risen to popularity among users and consumers. This seems to be especially so in the case of young adults who were affected by a sudden disappearance of entry-level jobs in hospitality, retail and associated functions, or diminished university experiences compared to expectations, due to the COVID-19 crisis. Although there is an increasing amount written on young people, sexuality and the media, research on both young adults and their experiences with sexuality online and online sex workers is scarce (e.g. Berg, 2017; McKee, 2016; Tsaliki & Chronaki, 2016; Jones, 2020). The same applies to OnlyFans, and despite increasing popularity among users (Ryan, 2019) sexual content platforms are also under-researched.

Finally, it is important to consider COVID-19's impact on online/offline intimacies. Indeed, changes need to be observed with new lenses that permit us to explore social and cultural specificities of sexual cultures across the

globe. This is even more relevant if we consider that many published works continue to reflect concerns about the replacement of romantic, ‘real-life’ intimacy with casual online forms of sexual performance (e.g. Lopes et al., 2020). Focusing on younger women, this chapter illustrates their challenges within patriarchal societies and the way in which sex work is heavily gendered. Our analysis focuses on the self-definition of our participants as sex workers. Our research examines how the OnlyFans creators articulate their professional self through the production of contents, marketing practices and customer relations to understand if it is possible to speak about deplatformed sex.

Our analysis in this chapter focuses on the ways and the extent to which our participants define themselves as sex workers; in fact, how the professional self is articulated through discourses of production, marketing and consumption. We highlight the elements through which digital sex work is articulated and becomes a form of labour, also encapsulating its different aspects: immaterial labour, intimate/affective or emotional labour and, not least, aesthetic labour. We argue that the different aspects of digital labour already established in academic discourse (e.g. Sanders et al., 2018; Brents & Jackson, 2013; Elias et al., 2017; Hardy, 2013) appear interchangeably in our participants’ constructions of how sex work on OnlyFans is a job and their negotiations of how content creation is understood on the margins of artistic work and/or as a profession or not.

## **Platformed Labour**

In this section, we analyse how transformations in the way labour is economically, politically and socially organised have contributed to renewed difficulties in how certain forms of work are seen – or not – as labour. We draw on the gendered dynamics that underpin the division between visible and invisible labour as a division between labour that is coded as ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’, ‘public’ and ‘private’ (Haraway, 2007). We consider also that transformations in the way the means of production are appropriated and deployed in a gendered way (Engels, 2010) are continually altered through the way capitalism has adapted and been itself transformed with and by new media and digital technologies.

These transformations are usually captured under the concept of ‘network societies’ (Castells, 2010; Van Dijk, 2010), a term that brings together not only the social – e.g. interpersonal – dimension of digital media, but also its decentralised infrastructure. Such decentralisation can be read both metaphorically and physically – and in both perspectives it can be connected to a decentralising of human experience: both one’s everyday life and, specifically, one’s productive role within modern society. The topic of individualisation as a central characteristic of modernity is outside the scope of this paper, but it is nevertheless a fundamental background issue to take into consideration – especially in how it pertains to this decentralisation, and the

loss of control and directedness from traditional social structures (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

Individualisation both fuels and is fuelled by specific transformations in the sociopolitical landscape of labour, often organised under the term ‘neoliberalism’. In this context, neoliberalism pertains to the loss of relevance of the Welfare State, its rhetorical re-articulation as a privilege, rather than a right, alongside fiscal austerity; a diminution of the reach and robustness of workers’ rights and their organisations; and a liberalisation of international trade agreements and relationships that make workers’ positions more volatile and mobile (Hermann, 2007; Van Doorn, 2017). At the intersection of neoliberalism and the network society, these authors argue, we can see the transformation of temporary work agencies into platforms that connect service providers with clients, in a new ‘gig economy’ – they serve as “*platform labor intermediaries* that [...] operate as new players in a dynamic temporary staffing industry [...], augmented by a more austere and zero-liability peer-to-peer model that leverages software to optimize labor’s flexibility, scalability, tractability, and its fragmentation” [italics in the original] (Van Doorn, 2017, p. 901). Workers become contractors, and contracts are replaced by Terms of Service; the profit is mainly accrued by the platforms rather than the workers-qua-contractors, but the former are still framed – culturally and legally – as entrepreneurs, as individuals working from and within their own initiative and means.

## Sexuality and Sex Work

The issue around workers-qua-entrepreneurs working with their own means is that it directly appeals to the negotiated and complex ways in which ‘labour’ is defined. Much of the debate is founded on Marxist and post-Marxist approaches to labour-power (rather than labour), and how it directly connects to embodied existence and deployment of physical, psychological and emotional resources. In this sense, or so the debate goes, sex work (often rendered as ‘prostitution’) is often seen as a way of selling the body directly rather than the results from the workers’ deployment of their own labour-power.

Another, differing, argument is that when sex work is performed without any sort of intermediaries that pay wages to the workers, then these become part of the *petite bourgeoisie* and thus often fall in an intermediary and reactionary class. Counterpoints to these more negative arguments often focus on the autonomy and empowerment that certain configurations of sex work allow (namely those where the worker has the ability to determine what they do and do not do, how and when they do it, and whom do they do it with). However, Van Der Veen (2001) notes that there is not just one form of sex work, but rather differing forms of it relating to the presence or absence of class differences between the sex worker and the person who contracts their services. This means that class differences, and non-class differences,

can impinge on the level of autonomy and self-determination that a sex worker can bring into a relationship with a client, even if that sex worker is self-employed. Personal issues (e.g. the perceived lack of other work and possibilities of work or economic vulnerability) or macro-social issues (e.g. the stigma attached to sex work, or its criminalisation) can all contribute to create an environment where sex workers offer more services or accept worse conditions than they would ideally prefer. Further, this analysis brings to the fore how, in an informational capitalist society, a complex system of surplus value extraction can be set up even without any direct interference between that system and the negotiations around what the sex worker will and will not do. That is to say, platforms like OnlyFans, and the payment systems they interact with (e.g. Visa) do not directly pay sex workers, nor do they directly mediate the interactions between sex workers and those who purchase a service. Yet, they still extract money out of the transaction by seeming to supply extra services to the workers or by facilitating their working conditions. We can then see how sex work is moralised in specific ways that muddy the analysis of the class and surplus value extraction processes, and that the gig economy mentioned above needs to be further specified in relation to the role sexuality plays in our society, as the purported ultimate truth-sayer about personal and social identity (Foucault, 1994).

### **OnlyFans – at the Intersection of Sexuality and Aesthetics**

Sexuality is not the sole specification that helps us frame OnlyFans sex work. We draw here on literature around aesthetic labour as a fundamental part of our analysis. Before being able to sell their work, content producers on OnlyFans have to, most of the time, produce the content (in the full extent of the meaning of the word), but also advertise it and curate it. In this sense, ‘content producers’ is a flawed terminology to address the selling of sexual content through OnlyFans, inasmuch as it obfuscates the rest of the labour processes involved in monetising that content in a way that allows the worker to obtain a liveable income. However, the curation and especially the advertising of content is done not in a mechanical, detached way, but in a way that is directly connected to notions of authenticity and artistry. This is patent in the platform’s name itself – its focus on ‘Fans’ demonstrates a clear conceptual connection to artists who are surrounded by their fans, with the attending parasocial relationships such a word carries (Hair, 2021).

The worker is a creator, and has fans – and to draw on artistic studies is to take seriously the arguments around how artists construct their public personae. Thus, marketing sexual content – especially in an age where ‘amateur’ porn is paradigmatic (Paasonen, 2010) – means projecting an image of authenticity. This authenticity is of the content, of the sharing of the content, and of the creation of an aura of intimacy around the content that its sexual dimension does not, by itself, guarantee. It is not only content that is created, then, but first and foremost a sense of connection and intimacy that falls

under the notion of emotional labour (Laurin, 2019) and of aesthetic labour (Elias et al., 2017). This, coupled with the precarious nature of platformed labour, and with the specific stigma of sex-related work, configures a situation where any and every moment of a content creator on OnlyFans can potentially be mobilised to bolster online platform engagement, marketing, retweets, likes and so on. Each moment, then, forces the choice – conscious or not – of letting the idea of work pervade everyday life, and to not only produce and mediate a seemingly immediate intimacy, but also to take up that parasocial intimacy as authentic. Here, we mean authentic not only in the sense of perceived-as-authentic, but also in the sense of experienced-as-authentic by the content producer themselves. In this sense, “[artists] also exemplify the individualised risks, responsibilities and precariousness of contemporary work” (Baym, 2018), wherein OnlyFans content producers can be seen (albeit only partially) as artists themselves, subjected to very similar criteria when publicising and selling their work (i.e. authenticity, authorship, originality, improvisational skills, relatability and so on). Just like artists, they are structurally pushed into presenting their work as effortless, as labourless – as non-work – since this bolsters the appearance of authenticity and intimacy.

In summary, then, we resorted to the platformed, sexualised and aestheticised labour of OnlyFans content producers – and their attending structural pressures – to try and set up an area of inquiry: how do content producers on OnlyFans conceptualise what they do vis-à-vis the notions of work/labour, and of sex work specifically? Do they see themselves as sex workers or not, and why and how? Do they see what they do as a form of labour or not, and through which notions and discourses do they express their positioning? What elements – of production, creation, dissemination and advertisement – do they consider to be work, if any, and how?

## **Methodology**

This section is grounded on a qualitative analysis of 20 semi-structured interviews conducted with Italian OnlyFans sexual(ised) content producers. The interviews took place between December 2020 and February 2021. We proceeded through a snowball method, starting with exploring Instagram and Twitter accounts. Our research does not seek to be representative of all OnlyFans producers, or even all Italian OnlyFans producers. However, by deploying a social constructionist approach, informed by previously noted Foucauldian frameworks around technologies of the self, we advance knowledge about how online sex work is a multi-layered phenomenon.

Twenty participants, between 19 and 29 years old, were interviewed, all self-identifying as cisgender women. They all live in Italy and Italian is their mother tongue. The interviews were conducted in Italian via online communication platforms, due to COVID-19 restrictions in Italy. The interviewees were given pseudonyms and the interviews transcribed verbatim and then translated into English through automated software (so as to not expose

sensitive data to any third parties) and the translation was checked by the authors of this chapter. To analyse the interviews, we adopted Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The interviews' transcriptions were read over several times to ascertain their main topics and salient concepts. The main themes were identified and then organised into topics and sub-topics (where appropriate).

### **Articulating the Professional Self**

A particularly useful concept in our discussion is Pezzutto's (2019) 'pornpreneur', a concept denoting how porn performers are increasingly internet entrepreneurs and in the process are expected to develop a range of skills and extend their work to a diverse range of business activities to increase revenue and legitimately monetise their work. Although our participants define themselves mostly as sex workers and content creators and less as porn performers, it seems that the concept of the pornpreneur also contributes effectively to the following analytical discussion, which unfolds through two thematic sections: (1) *Producing and marketing practices and customer relations* and (2) *Deplatforming sex, the ethical framing of the sexual body and the demonetisation of digital sex work*. At the same time this thematic framing also draws upon Cardoso and Scarcelli's (2021) recent work on OnlyFans performers' articulations of the platformed body, whereby they recount how corporeal, technical and self-transformational discursive practices shape and provide sustainability to the sexual body as a site of entrepreneurship.

Of the 20 participants, half perform on OnlyFans on a full-time basis (or do not have any other job) and the rest have an additional occupation (as student or an employee). Three participants are between 19 and 20 years old, fifteen are between 21 and 26 years old, and two are between 28 and 29 years old. Although this chapter does not address the interconnectedness between age and the construction of the professional self, this element coincides with the argument that sex work, more specifically digital sex work, is often defined by age (Sanders et al., 2018). Therefore, challenges to do with the precarious position of the work, concerns about the body or the socio-cultural construction of the sex worker as an illegitimate career need to be further investigated empirically. When the question of how they define themselves emerges, the majority of participants define themselves as sex workers, while of the five participants who define what they do as 'artistic nude', most also feel comfortable positioning as sex workers.

I don't consider it a job, but I consider myself a sex worker because I'm offering paid content.

(Samuela, 26)

Although, as Samuela mentions, in several cases participants do not discuss content creation and their performance as a job, our argument is that the

conditions of payment, aesthetic and affective labour, self-branding, new business and promotion practices inevitably shape their activity as work, even in cases where participants explicitly deny the definition of what they do as a job, like Eleonora:

I don't need it: I already have two salaries. Right now I see OnlyFans as a sexual pleasure. [...] at that time I think about masturbating. It has become my sexual pleasure.

(Eleonora, 22)

Her comments about which practices increase her income (“the real gain of OnlyFans is not the subscription, it is not the private videos or photos sold, but the tips”), the evaluation of the platform’s technical characteristics and interface, or the aesthetic labour invested in content production (“a set where I had my hair pulled up in two pigtails in which I behaved like a child with a dildo; photos in which I become a mistress: in one set I was wearing a full leather harness and red lipstick”) inevitably shape what she does as labour, and are considerations that do not wholly fit her narrative of it becoming her “sexual pleasure”. Therefore, we focus on practices through which performers articulate the immaterial, aesthetic, relational and affective labour of the digital sex worker more broadly – all aspects of the broader concept of platformed labour – through discourses about aesthetics, self-branding, economics, rights or policies that emerge during the discussions, even in the cases where participants do not directly identify as sex workers (Rand, 2019).

### **Producing and Marketing Practices and Customer Relations**

The very fact that our participants articulate themselves as entrepreneurs derives from their sophisticated use of (digital) marketing and sex market terms: ‘customer’, ‘sponsor’, ‘sales’, ‘camgirls’ etc., even in the cases where they do not define themselves as sex workers. The equally sophisticated ways in which they position themselves as sex workers draw on the range of entrepreneurial activities which they are expected to perform, from the creation of the content (the product) and its sustainability (self-branding across platforms) to the relational labour of customer relations.

I answer 24 hours a day to all the people who write to me, even ten times a day, I'm ultra active and I also take whole afternoons to dedicate myself only to OnlyFans content.

(Rebecca, 21)

Once a week I create content and for the rest of the days I do the editing, I spam my profile, I find new buyers. I'm not too far from a camgirl: even if there is no direct contact with the client, I still create adult content.

(Camilla, 28)

As neoliberal subjects of sexual entrepreneurship (Harvey & Gill, 2011) or pornpreneurs in the broader sense, our participants are expected to provide a full range of products (their portfolio) and services, involving but not limited to producing and editing content; expanding their portfolio, including the production of custom content; continuously working on self-branding practices; growing their fan base and adapting to changing platform policies and payment terms; engaging in diverse parasocial relational work with customers.

The key element through which OnlyFans performers define what they do as a job is the production of paid content that takes a certain amount of time to be produced and edited before being published. This is often connected to livelihood, in the sense that it is this labour they perform that allows them to have a living income, even if we cannot talk about wages in a technical sense.

I know girls who work as content creators who, unlike me, apply and spend several hours a day there.

(Giacoma, 26)

Yes, I consider it a job because I pay the rent and the bills there: I live there.

(Elda, 25)

Adding to this, performers are expected to provide a cost-estimation of what they offer (decide the amount of their subscription, whether they will have a tip or sales), which they usually do in relation to the type of content they offer, the frequency of producing new content and the requests of custom content.

It really depends on who I have in front of me, on how much the customer can spend. [...] More than the value of the content, it is a question of knowing how to manage one's income, understand people's tastes, understand how far they can go and how much money they have to spend.

(Nerina, 21)

Applying an entrepreneurial philosophy of the gig economy, OnlyFans workers are providing repertoires of how they decide the cost of their content and services. That, however, does not come without consequences and struggles, given that many performers are expected to explain and rationalise why their subscriptions are low or high. In the process they offer critical feminist accounts about women's sexual labour in pornography, expressing concerns about the devaluation of sex work, not only in terms of standard employment relations (O'Connell Davidson, 2014) but also in terms of the challenges of the more recent professionalisation of women's sexual labour brought by the platformed condition.

Many of us keep the cost low, so that people are more enticed to buy. In reality, in this way they lose their value and are commercialising

themselves, giving themselves the object woman, and that's what we wanted to avoid. For this reason many are angry with OnlyFans and the continuous low-cost pornographic sale, we are struggling to make the nude be done, but not to make the times go back as before.

(Selvaggia, 23)

An interesting discourse appearing in their discussions of how they choose the economic value of their services – also emerging in the quote above – is how the peer-to-peer education and support works, having broader implications about sex workers' rights and the issue of the legitimatisation of sex work and digital sex work more specifically.

I started alone, in case of doubts I contacted girls who had already had it for some time.

(Susanna, 23)

Everything I know I have learned from other girls I know who have given me advice.

(Loretto, 19)

Hand in hand with attributing economic value to their content, OnlyFans performers are also explaining how they are coping with the managerial and marketing requirements of platformed labour. Some of them have searched for information online or read all OnlyFans policy documentation thoroughly, while others know about marketing themselves 'intuitively', have learned from their boyfriends (who in many cases manage their accounts) or have joined support groups or asked colleagues for advice.

I asked some colleagues for advice recently, because I didn't know which platform to spam my profile (other than Instagram).

(Dorothea, 21)

I would like to inquire about marketing to improve my business.

(Camilla, 28)

In the course of the interviews, participants acknowledge the precariousness of their work and the many ways in which it is culturally and economically devalued. Nevertheless, they are taking the matter of improving their businesses, or learning how to run them effectively, seriously, projecting ways in which they embrace their entrepreneurial subjectivity more fully (Gill, 2014).

Apart from the logistics of creating content (varying from a few hours during the weekend to a few hours during the day) and sustaining relationships with their customers, time is also interpreted as how time-consuming aesthetic labour may be; each performer works on a certain body, hair or make-up routine in order to be consistent to the concept offered in their services.

I am a fitness fan: I train every day and obviously I want this thing to be seen in the videos and photos I take, I like to have a certain physical prowess.  
(Sibilla, 26)

Performers work through technologies of sexiness (Evans et al., 2010) to construct, embody and perform a certain sexual self, whether this might be ‘natural’ and ‘born with this body’ or a more sophisticated care of the sexual body. This is a cornerstone of the aesthetic labour invested in work and perceived as such in the overall understanding of work. Apart from the body, hair and make-up routine which inevitably means a cost for the performer and therefore is considered part of the job, potential or existing collaborations with brands as well as collaborations with professional photographers are also included in the overall budget needed to sustain the business of being an OnlyFans worker.

When a professional photographer contacts me and asks me to do a nude set, my budget is 100€. If I have to change cities to do a shooting, I also ask for a refund for transport. With non-professional photographers, who shoot for passion, there is no money exchange: I sign the release and everyone with those photos can do whatever they want.  
(Rebecca, 22)

Considering in this context issues of rights, content use and copyright, some performers mention that a collaboration with a professional photographer means that payment is also included. Many performers mention that, in cases where they collaborate with photographers, payment is waived when the agreement includes a shared and fair use of the content from both sides. This discourse about any sort of contracting and terms of agreement implies an entrepreneurial understanding of the work, even if it comes for ‘free’, as it might end up profitable for either of the parts or the platform labour intermediaries (Van Doorn, 2017), such as OnlyFans.

The aesthetic labour invested in production, as well as the conceptualisation of one’s products and services in order for a coherent and niche portfolio to be created, are practices contributing to self-branding, a component of indirect internet-enabled sex work (Sanders et al., 2018) and of platformed labour more broadly. As Cardoso and Scarcelli (2021) argue, authenticity and self-branding contribute to the assemblage work of bodies on OnlyFans. Self-branding, the strategic construction and representation of the online self (Marwick, 2013) become part of understanding and embodying the entrepreneurial self, given that it contributes to the cost of the business and overall revenue. Customer relations are also part of self-branding, as cross-platform promotion and marketing of their work, making self-branding a key discourse through which our participants articulate the notion of the sex worker.

Customer relationships and the parasocial relational labour are a part of the job which our participants discuss. Scholars have illustrated the element of authenticity and realness in amateur porn, gonzo and cam sex, deriving from the ways in which the reality and ordinariness of the performer is

mediated and to which consumers relate (Hardy, 2008; Patterson, 2004). This is an inherent feature of OnlyFans, and performers' work within it, where real-time interaction is a significant feature given the nature of the platform (Cardoso & Scarcelli, 2021), as in following the everyday intimate routine of the performer, customers both consume the product produced (videos, photos), but also interact with them in real life through chatting.

Others tell me the story of their life or their days: for example, the other day a client of mine said to me 'I'm very sorry, I would like to give you more money but they just fired me and I don't know what to do.'

(Gaetana, 29)

In this sense, as Hardy (2008) observes, there is a much more significant relational process taking place in which the consumer is actually interacting with the performer whose content they are consuming "as opposed to simply looking at images of an inaccessible performer giving an overplayed performance" (p. 62). This part of the job is not necessarily unproblematic for our participants, who often raise the burden of having to do it all (from production to customer service), while such parasocial relational labour is not often considered as part of their sexual labour (Hair, 2021; Rouse & Salter, 2021).

I try to hear from my customers every day: this takes me a lot of time, but I know that it helps to make the customer become attached and to renew the subscription the following month.

(Elda, 25)

Thus, performers are mostly working towards their services' sustainability, creating customer loyalty through continuous communication with their clientele and so pushing back against the precarious nature of platformed labour. Such affective sexual labour often wears performers out, given that it requires ample time to invest in communication, and is rarely documented or taken into account as part of the monetisation of sex work.

### **Deplatforming Sex, the Ethical Framing of the Sexual Body and the Demonetisation of Digital Sex Work**

Apart from discussing how they produce and promote their work, as well as how copyright and rights and economic policy issues emerge in this process, our participants discussed the issue of sex being increasingly deplatformed from popular, mainstream platforms like Instagram, Facebook or even PayPal, both as a result of the enforcement of stricter policies (e.g. Blunt & Wolf, 2020; Blunt et al., 2021) but also as a result of popular platforms aiming for more 'appropriate' – thus more censored – forms of content (Swords et al., 2021).

Customers come mainly from Telegram, also because Instagram will no longer allow you to publish certain content from December 20 onwards, the day on which I will lose my entire portfolio.

(Annachiara, 22)

Right now on Instagram you have to be very careful, due to the new policy. You have to work hard to find ways to advertise your Onlyfans link (it is not even possible to write the name of the site).

(Rebecca, 22)

References to deplatforming sex emerged in the context of accounting for how immaterial labour increases, from participants having to work across platforms to increase sponsorship, grow their fan base or promote themselves. Alongside this is the need for them to become savvier in using platforms and digital tools, which means becoming even more platform literate to adapt to continuously changing websites and policies. Participants also mention how deplatforming not only occurs when a platform restricts access to the workers' content or 'shadowbans' (the practice of seamlessly diminishing the visibility of content posted by certain accounts) them (Are, 2021), but also when they fall victims to slut-shaming or harassment.

On Instagram I say it (but not all my acquaintances know that I have an Instagram profile) and on Facebook I have never even posted set photos, because I don't think it should be of interest.

I know some nude models (they do nude art) who have had problems with Instagram and haven't posted for years because too many people have been bothering them.

(Gaetana, 29)

Apparently, then, shadowbanning or platforms' direct censorship of content is only one aspect of the multifaceted problem of deplatforming for digital sex workers, with the cultural and societal impacts being more significant and possibly more harmful. As already documented in academic fora and research, deplatforming of any sort means not just immediate banning of access to payments and shortage of current and potential work sites/environments (Blunt et al., 2021), but also an increasing demonetisation of digital sex work (Caplan & Gillespie, 2020). Further, the demonetisation of sex work online appears to be taking place in the context of how sex work is perceived in different cultural contexts, a condition related to how much sex work is established, popular or embedded in certain cultures.

Most Italians see it as a waste of money: some even ask me to give them free photos!

(Loretto, 19)

I've noticed that foreigners complain less: you can ask them for more or less any amount and, in the worst case, they don't buy the content. The Italian always has something to say about prices!

(Azzura, 19)

Our participants compare and contrast Italian with (mostly) American or other foreign customers, commenting upon the reluctance of Italians to pay

for services or their complaints about the services' pricing. Such concerns about how certain cultures devalue (and in effect demonetise) sex work are also associated with the ways in which sexual labour is socially constructed as illegitimate in certain cultural contexts and its often uncertain or paralegal socio-legal status (Rand, 2019). Challenges relating to how sex workers are thought of and how customers behave are potentially linked to such cultural conceptualisations of sexual labour. To this extent, demonetisation also takes more covert forms, such as harassment or psychological and verbal violence, burdening workers with having to cope with behaviours reflecting the stigmatisation of their work (and the related social concerns about it thereof) (Sanders et al., 2018; Rand, 2019).

## Conclusions

This chapter explored the ways in which OnlyFans workers define themselves, or not, as sex workers. In fact, we aimed at understanding how OnlyFans workers articulate the professional self in the context of the gig economy of platformed labour. Taking into account ongoing theoretical and academic research that prioritises the need to understand and problematise the insecurity of platformed and online sex work and its diverse and complex nature, we have thematically mapped the key issues shaping OnlyFans' workers' agenda when it comes to how labour is defined in their particular case. Our work has been informed by theoretical and empirical approaches to aesthetic and affective labour, the class-defined nature of work, and the ways in which authenticity and empowerment become technologies through which OnlyFans workers are defining and shaping their professional selves; not least, we were interested in positioning towards how such practices are also taking the form of struggles for autonomy and professional and social well-being in the challenging neoliberal entrepreneurial context of the gig economy.

Our participants' definitions of themselves invariably played around the tension between sex worker and content creator, while acknowledging the socially loaded nature of the former. Their agenda unfolds in two themes, one related to production, marketing practices and customer relations, and the second to do with deplatforming sex, the ethical framing of the sexual body and the demonetisation of digital sex work. These thematic sections envelop the key discursive elements through which OnlyFans workers articulate what their job is, what they need to do and what is at stake in the process of 'keeping the business running'. By deploying the range of entrepreneurial activities, OnlyFans workers are defining the multifaceted nature of their work at the same time that they are positioning themselves as pornpreneurs, unpacking the specificities of the job to do with sexuality and sexual content as a commodity.

An interesting aspect of their accounts is the feminist and post-feminist ways in which they approach the community of sex workers, peer-to-peer education, workers' rights in the sex industry and the challenges of the professionalisation of women's sexual labour brought by their platformed condition. Alongside such concerns come nuanced thoughts about issues of

copyright and collaborations, whether these are among sex workers, sex workers and other types of adjacent content creators (e.g. photographers), or workers and brands. In this sense, there is a full entrepreneurial rationale which our participants unpack when talking about the challenges and expectations of the job – aspects that have been seriously under-researched until now. Moreover, although there is well-established work on the parasocial relational labour of platformed work, our findings show that more nuanced empirical work needs to take place. Customer relations are inherently part of one's self-branding, they take place across platforms and through various marketing practices, and they constitute a significant part of the articulation of the professional self. If we consider how culturally and socially loaded the concept of sex work is and the burden of social stigma it frequently carries, then a more in-depth examination of how relational labour is lived and perceived seems paramount.

Finally, there is a key concern among workers, one which sits at the intersection of economic decisions by private companies and the sphere of the political, and which has been growing in the debate about policing sex work and sexual content. Issues around the increasing and systematic deplatforming of sex, and therefore sex workers, are discussed through its consequences on workers' daily life, professional choices and the evolving demonetisation of their work. Deplatforming policies and actions seem to expand, instead of limiting, the already significant proportion of immaterial labour sex workers provide. If all their labour is platform labour, then deplatforming means losing access to basic means of subsistence. Having summed up key issues that emerge from our participants' accounts of the entrepreneurial self, we need to acknowledge that to grasp the diversity of platformed sex work in terms of production, representation and consumption is a much more complex research endeavour, in terms of both theory and methodology.

## Note

- 1 This study was part of the research project *Digital Intimacies and Emerging Adults in Southern Europe*, funded by the Independent Social Research Foundation – London ([www.isrf.org](http://www.isrf.org)).

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