

Sex work in a Latemodern Context : *OnlyFans* and what it Means for Sex Workers

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The term sex work is a notion used to describe a collection of pursuits relating to the interchange of money for sexual services (Harcourt and Donovan, 2005). Typically, sex work is divided into two classifications: direct sex work and in-direct sex work. Direct sex work categorises acts such as prostitution and escorting, both in an indoor and street context (Pitcher, 2015). In-direct sex work is used to classify acts such as stripping, peep show performances, pole and lap dancing, as well as virtual sex work such as camming (Sanders et al., 2009 cited in Pitcher, 2015). Despite in-direct sex workers not offering genital contact, a monetary fee is still exchanged. The online sex industry has been present since the early 21st century, and despite being heavily stigmatised, both in-direct and direct sex work industries remain a significant part of the contemporary economy (Weitzer, 2013).

The platform most commonly used by sex workers to offer online sexual services is *OnlyFans*. *OnlyFans* is a subscription-based social media platform that enables the commodification of creator and fan relationships. *OnlyFans* has seen a dramatic increase in popularity for creators and consumers over the last 5 years (Shane, 2021, as cited in Easterbrook-Smith, 2022). The platform was created in 2016 by Tim Stokely (who has previous experience working within the pornographic industry). The site's website states "The *OnlyFans* platform empowers creators to own their potential and revolutionises the connections

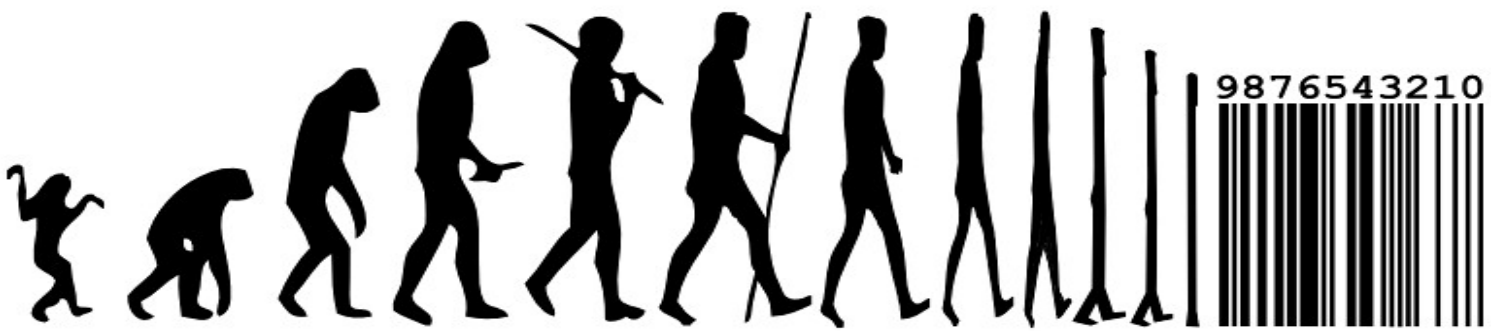
between creators and their fans" (*OnlyFans*, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic was a key contributing factor when considering the site's rise in popularity. Despite initially being aimed at influencers and celebrities, the site gave those who typically offered direct sexual services a chance to transition to providing online sexual services (Brouwers and Herrmann, 2020), ensuring that despite a lockdown being in place, direct sex workers continued to generate an income. Aside from offering direct sex workers a chance to



continue to maintain an income throughout the pandemic, the site also rose in popularity, primarily amongst those (particularly women) who found themselves without employment due to the impacts COVID-19 pandemic lockdown (Brouwers and

Herrmann, 2020). *OnlyFans* has been a central component when assessing contemporary developments within the sex work industry. The site has brought both positive and negative consequences for sex workers practising in contemporary society.

"Online sex work can be understood as a form of sex work, but also as a kind of gig economy or platform-economy work" (Bleakley 2014; Pitcher 2015; Berg 2016; Ruberg 2016; Rand 2019 as cited in Easterbrook-Smith, 2022). Woodcock and Graham (2020) define gig economy as "labour markets that are characterised by independent

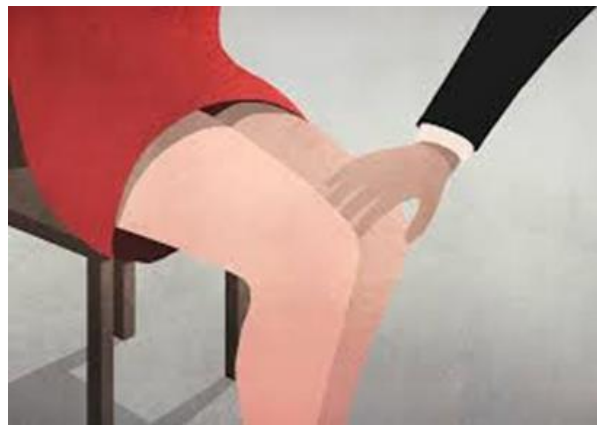


contracting that happens through, via, and on digital platforms” (Woodcock and Graham, 2020, p9). Due to a rise in e-commerce, gig economy work and platformization over the last (roughly) 20 years, contemporary markets have shifted to facilitate the exchange of a diverse array of goods and services through digital platforms for both companies and individuals (for example, *Uber*, *Airbnb*, *Deliveroo*, and *OnlyFans*) (Cunningham and Kendall, 2011; Roy and Shrivastava, 2020). It is clear that gig economy work has allowed many individuals to disconnect from the ridged regulations of traditional employment (Roy and Shrivastava, 2020) (it allows individuals to dissociate from boundaries such as management hierarchies, shift schedules, minimum hourly pay rates, and geographical employment restrictions).

OnlyFans has provided sex workers with a platform that enables them to monetise and control their material and content without the interference of regulators typical within traditional forms of direct sex work (pimps, procurers as well as managers). The most empowering thing is that “it’s no longer centralised...before you had conglomerates and agents to go through” (Pezzutto, 2019, p. 44). Roy and Shrivastava (2020) highlight how gig economy work can often be an efficient, flexible, and straightforward way to produce an income. Online sex workers (operating on only fans) have borderless working environments, meaning they are not bound by any geographical restraint. This can result in the potential for increased earning opportunities (Jones, 2015).

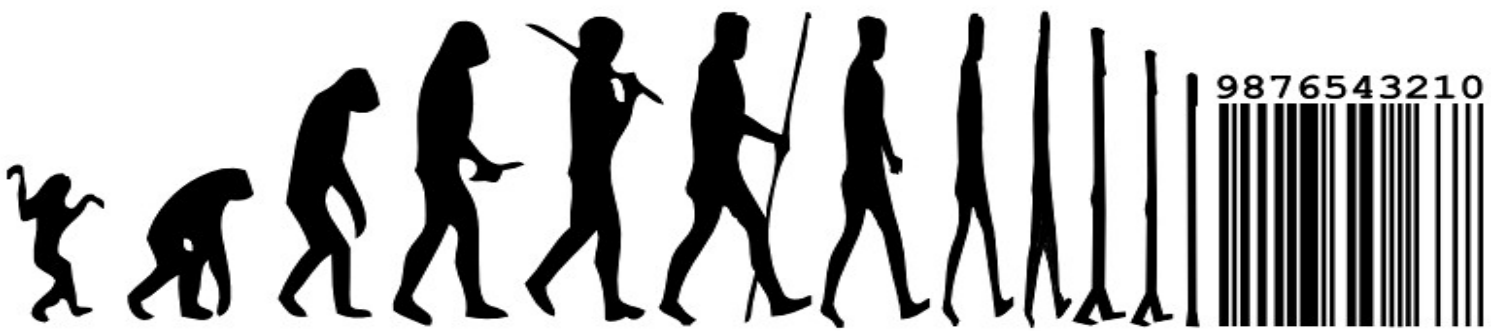
The rise in gig economy work through the *OnlyFans* site has enabled many (cisgender and transgender) sex workers to have “more flexibility, autonomy, and agency of power” (Pezzutto, 2019, p. 44) over

their working life and schedule. This signifies contemporary sex workers operating on platforms are often able to disconnect or less commonly experience challenges and prejudices evidenced within a large percentage of employment sectors. This could include (but is not limited to) gender-based wage discrepancies, male-dominated management and positions of power and gender stereotyping which is common within workplaces in many sectors.



Despite gig economy work allowing individuals to disassociate from the bounds of traditional employment, it ultimately means individuals also disassociate from the benefits of traditional employment (namely, a stable income, sick pay, regulated working hours as well as legal protection and workplace safety). Despite online sex work being classified as a safer method of sex work (Cunningham, DeAngelo and Tripp, 2017), all forms of sex workers continue too persistently be highly stigmatised. Goffman (1963) proposes that industries or individuals subject to stigmatisation often face detrimental outcomes such as social exclusion and a decline in the value of an individual's identity. Sex workers are largely estranged from the safety measures and insurances that are seen within mainstream employment sectors. The lack of workplace safety paired with the stigmatisation of sex work means those who identify or are labelled as sex workers are often devalued and discriminated against, which in extreme cases can result in (online and offline) sex workers being subject to sexual, verbal, and physical abuse (Sanders et al, 2018).

The rise in gig economy work, platformization (especially platforms such as *OnlyFans*) and internet usage, in general, have all simultaneously



made engaging in sex work increasingly more accessible (Jones, 2015). Although online sex workers can screen clients more easily and are at less risk of physical abuse than their counterparts (those who offer direct sexual services on the street), they are subject to different forms of abuse such as webcam stalking, data leaks, and the unauthorised sharing of the sexual content they post online, all of which poses a significant risk to their public safety (Sanders et al, 2018). Sander et al (2018) found that many sex workers experience blackmailing or doxing, whereby individuals share sex workers' (*OnlyFans*) accounts or content with family members, employers, and landlords. This resulted in many sex workers becoming estranged from their work, personal family spheres and housing arrangements due to being outed as sex workers.

OnlyFans facilitates individual sex workers to share their content with a vast audience. This notion links *OnlyFans* to the concept of synoptic surveillance. Mathiesen (1997) proposes a new form of surveillance that is in opposition to that of the panopticon (the minority surveilling and having power over the majority (Foucault, 1977)). Dissimilarly to the panopticon, in the synoptic surveillance structure, a minority group is repeatedly scrutinised by a wider group. It represents an “enormously extensive system enabling the many to see and contemplate the few” (Mathiesen, 1997 p.219).

Synoptic surveillance shows a shift in hierarchical organisation typical within the structure central to panoptic surveillance. This shift is due to the rise in mass media and technology within contemporary society (dashcams, phones, and social media platforms). According to the user data which is clearly located on the *OnlyFans* website home

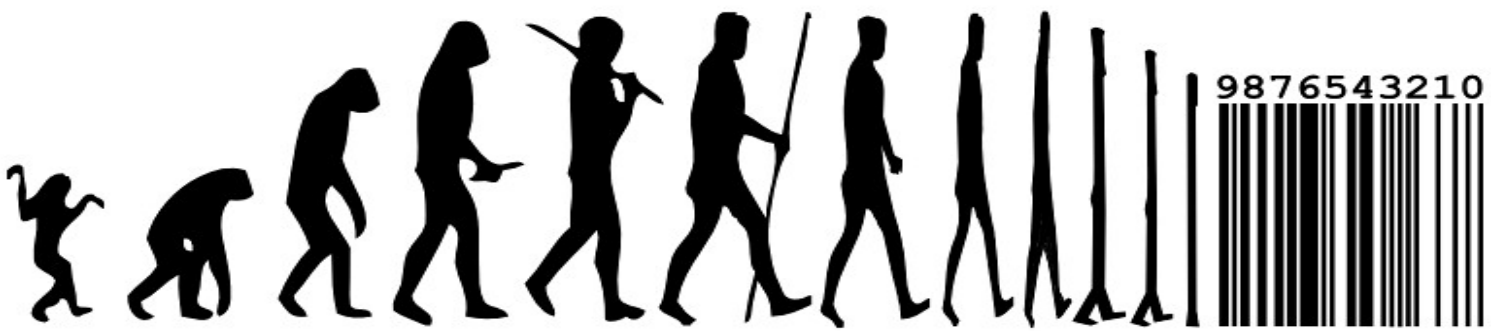
page, the platform has roughly 3 million creators and more than 300,000,000 registered users. This shows how platforms such as *OnlyFans* are facilitating synoptic surveillance. The structure of *OnlyFans* is based around the mass audience (the 300,000,000 subscribers on *OnlyFans*) subscribing to (surveilling) the creators (the 3,000,000 uploading content, many of whom are sex works).

The structure is also based around the subscriber contributing a monetary incentive to the creator in order to view their premium or exclusive content (*OnlyFans*, 2023), and effectively becoming more involved with said creators. Synoptic surveillance poses both positive and negative impacts for those opting to share content via *OnlyFans*. The structure allows sex workers' content to (potentially) be viewed by the masses, this in turn generates an increased income for the creator. However, through continuous surveillance by a mass of subscribers, it is not uncommon for an obsession to form. In many cases these obsessions can develop into stalking, often users “hack to acquire information... then using the information to stalk them” (Jones, 2015).



This critical reflection has assessed sex work in a modern context, paying particular attention to the impact of *OnlyFans* on the sex work industry. The discussion has proposed both the

positive and negative impacts of *OnlyFans* and has related this to notions including platformization, gig economy work and synoptic surveillance. It is easy to theorise that the majority of scholars have positioned technical advancements such as the internet and platforms like *OnlyFans* as positive apparatus for sex workers (Jones, 2015), as they



increase safety, autonomy and creative freedom. However, must be noted that despite this, there is still a huge range of stigmatisation, potential harm and crimes attached to the use of *OnlyFans* and online sex work in general.

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