

OnlyFans: The Celebritization of Online Sexual Labour

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Abstract

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a shift towards digital forms of employment, including sex work. The creation of the online platform, OnlyFans, has allowed sex workers to sell sexual content on a site that is easily accessible and readily available. However, the rising popularity of the platform drew attention to celebrity presence and removed the ability for sex workers to be successful, as the presence of celebrities made changes to the way individuals could advertise and benefit financially. Although previous research addresses the nature of online pornography and sex work, there is a dearth of knowledge regarding the site “OnlyFans” and its impact on the current age of online sexual labour. Therefore, this research aims to highlight the celebritization of the platform “Only Fans” and its impact on online sexual labour.

Key words: Sex work, COVID-19, Online Sexual Labour, Celebritization

Résumé

Tout au long de la pandémie de COVID-19, on a assisté à une évolution vers des formes numériques d'emploi, y compris le travail du sexe. La création de la plateforme en ligne OnlyFans a permis aux travailleurs du sexe de vendre du contenu sexuel sur un site facilement accessible et disponible. Toutefois, la popularité croissante de la plateforme a attiré l'attention sur la présence de célébrités et a empêché les travailleurs du sexe de réussir, car la présence de célébrités a modifié la manière dont les individus pouvaient faire de la publicité et en tirer des bénéfices financiers. Bien que des recherches antérieures aient abordé la nature de la pornographie en ligne et du travail du sexe, on manque de connaissances sur le site "OnlyFans" et son impact sur l'ère actuelle du travail sexuel en ligne. Par conséquent, cette recherche vise à mettre en évidence la célébration de la plateforme "Only Fans" et son impact sur le travail sexuel en ligne.

Mots clés : Travail du sexe, COVID-19, Travail sexuel en ligne, Célébration

1.0 Introduction

As digital and online spaces are becoming increasingly popular, so is the demand for online sex work and pornography (Do & Nathan-Roberts, 2021). Specifically, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the shift towards online sex work, as many workers, such as street sex workers and restaurant workers, have lost their traditional forms of labour (Sanchez, 2022; Friedman, 2021, Nelson, Yu & McBride, 2020;). Previous research addresses the nature of online pornography and sex work (Durisin, Van Der Muelen, & Bruckert, 2018; Drucker & Nieri, 2016; Litam, Speciale & Balkin, 2022), however, there is a dearth of knowledge regarding the site “OnlyFans” (OF) and its impact on the current age of online sexual labour. OF is a subscription-based platform where users can sell sexual content, usually through photos or videos (OnlyFans.com). This critical commentary makes the following argument: the rising celebrity and influencer presence on OF removes the ability of sex workers to engage in sexual labour and be successful on the platform (whereas celebrities on the platform overshadow and devalues the work of sex workers by engaging in non-sexual acts).

The engagement of celebrities and influencers on the OF platform, such as Bella Thorne, Iggy Azalea, and Tana Mongeau, inherently turns the “safe sex” site into a stream of entertainment and diminishes sexual labour for sex workers (Haynes, 2014; Sanchez, 2022). More so, the presence of influencers on OF has removed the significance of OF being a platform solely for sexual content and sex work. The use of OF by influencers and celebrities such as Bella Thorne and Iggy Azalea is not sexually explicit (i.e., the purpose is not that of sex work or explicit pornography) and therefore OF is moving away from sexually explicit content, resulting in negative effects for sex workers, such as loss of income. Additionally, in August 2021, OF announced the banning of “sexually explicit” content which was the result of financial corporations, such as banks and credit card

companies, threatening the removal of their services from the platform. After the announcement, many content creators and subscribers vocalized their stance against the policy change and OF reversed its statement. Although the decision to ban sexual content was not implemented, it can be argued that financial corporations continue to have a controlling interest in OF (Jennings, 2021).

2.0 Is Sex Work, Work?

The classification of sex work as legitimate labour has been negotiated and contradicted in the Canadian context for years as sex work labour laws continue to be challenged and modified (Durisin et al., 2018). Sex work laws have made it difficult for sex workers to engage in their work due to concerns about safety and criminalization. The current sex work laws criminalize potential clients for communicating with sex workers; the sale of sexual services; profiting as a third party; procuring someone to engage in sexual acts; and the advertisement of sexual services (Bruckert & Hannem, 2013; Snow, Steely, & Bensel, 2020).

Debates surrounding prostitution laws stem partly from sex work not being recognized as legitimate work. This issue is one that many feminist researchers, such as Bernstein (2001) and Rubin (1984), have expressed. Van Der Muelen (2012) acknowledges that “while sex work researchers and the international sex workers’ rights movement have been vocal in their conceptualization that sex work is a type of labour, this understanding has not fully permeated popular and mainstream discourse” (p. 150). The lack of recognition of sex work as legitimate labour denies sex workers protection of labour laws and regulations (Bruckert & Hannem, 2013). Framing sex work as work legitimizes sexual activity as a form of labour and broadens the conversation to include dancers, porn actors, street-based sex workers, escorts, and many more (Durisin et al., 2018). However, there has been pushback among anti-prostitute feminists, such as Mackinnon (2011), claiming that sex work exploits women

and further perpetuates male violence (Coy, Smiley, & Tyler, 2018; Van Den Muelen, 2012).

From an anti-prostitution framework, feminists who call for the abolition of sex work “do so from a position that seeks to end these hierarchies, to challenge male entitlement to profit from women’s bodies and Indigenous lands and create a world where women and girls can live free from male violence” (Coy et al., 2018, p. 1931). The anti-prostitution framework, also known as the sexual exploitation approach, observes sex workers as having a lack of free choice and having been coerced into the exploitation of their bodies (MacKinnon, 2011). MacKinnon (2011) acknowledges that “in these transactions, the money coerces the sex rather than guaranteeing consent to it, making prostitution a practice of serial rape” (p. 274). Sex work is often seen as a last-resort option when there are no other “traditional” options for income (MacKinnon, 2011). There is also an assumption that sex workers are a risk to themselves and others and need protection (Bruckert & Hannem, 2013).

On the other side of the sex work debate are the sex-positive feminists, which argue for the decriminalization of sex work. Snow et al. (2020) acknowledges that sex workers and sex-positive feminist have “argued that the prostitution laws within the Criminal Code of Canada prevented sex workers from implementing safety plans by prohibiting the communication between sex workers and their clients” (p. 2) As long as prostitution is not viewed as work and viewed as a ‘problem’, sex workers’ social and physical well-being will continue to be at risk (Bruckert & Hannem, 2013). More so, as opposed to anti-prostitution feminists who claim that sex work further perpetuates male violence and exploitation, sex-positive feminists view sex work as an act of resistance to heteronormative tropes and gendered constructions, as well as a space to partake in sexual expression and freedom (Durisin et al., 2018). Most sex workers can control the sexual interaction and “are compensated for what is usually expected from women for free and have independent lives and anonymous sex with many

partners-behaviours usually monopolized by men, hence liberating for women” (MacKinnon, 2011, p. 273). The framework of this critical commentary will be from a sex-positive lens, arguing the rising celebrity presence on the platform OF restricts the ability of sex workers to succeed, while also converting the OF platform into a form of entertainment. While this paper’s focus is on the celebritization of OF it is only *one* of many factors impacting sex workers’ ability to succeed. Other factors, such as credit card companies’ hesitancy to be affiliated with sexual content, affect the labour of sex workers on the platform.

3.0 Online Sexual Labour

The transition to digital technologies has had a profound impact on individuals, particularly regarding the navigation of laws and the concerns with online sexual services ((Sanchez, 2022; Cunningham et al., 2017; Litam et al., 2022). As stated previously, there have been ongoing debates about sex work being classified as work. (Bruckert & Hannem, 2013; Snow et al., 2020; Durisin et al., 2018). The introduction of online services further blurs the line between sexual labour and legitimate work.

The transition to online sex work has not only altered the structure of sex work but has made it more accessible and increased the control of working conditions for sex workers (Argento et al., 2018). Moreover, researchers have highlighted that online sex work has increased profit and safety among the sex worker community (Cunningham et al., 2017), with one study illustrating that internet-based sex workers' incidents of violence are significantly lower than regular street sex workers (Campbell, Sanders, Scoular, Pitcher & Cunningham, 2019). However, there still is pushback against online sexual labour in North America by credit card companies, such as VISA and Mastercard (Lapowsky, 2021), citing that there is an increased risk of sexual exploitation, even though there is no research to prove it (Argento et al., 2018). There are also concerns of online harassment and the recording of sexual

activity without consent (Cunningham et al., 2017). Although there is research regarding the benefits and risks of online sexual labour, there is a lack of research regarding the experiences of female sex workers online (Drucker & Nieri, 2016). More so, the recently developed OF platform has undergone critique following celebrity Bella Thorne's appearance on the site, which will be further explored below.

4.0 The Celebritization of OnlyFans

OF is one of many online sexual labour sites available to the public, however, recent celebrity engagement has increased its popularity (Sanchez, 2022). According to the “about us” section on OF, the site was founded in 2016 by Tim Stokely and has become one of the largest social platforms, with over 150 million registered users, and over 1.5 million content creators (OnlyFans, 2016). The site was first developed to provide creators with a platform in which they could monetize their content free of advertisers (OnlyFans, 2016). According to Henderson (2020), “OnlyFans is a content subscription service where creators can earn money from users – the “fans” – who pay a monthly membership fee to access their exclusive content” (Para 4). While OF accepts creators from all genres, it has primarily focused on sexually exclusive material that cannot be viewed on other social media sites, such as YouTube and Instagram. OF also noted on their “about us” page that Beyonce had name-dropped OF in a song titled “Savage Remix”, further promoting its popularity.

Furthermore, the legal concerns surrounding online sexual labour and OF have not been thoroughly investigated. Consent and advertising laws seem to be at the forefront of concerns for online sex workers. Cunningham et al., (2017) acknowledged that risks of online sexual labour include facing issues of consent with the recording of sexual activity. As opposed to in-person communication and interaction where consent can be established upfront, these lines are blurred with online sexual labour as interactions

between sex workers and clients are through screens. Advertisement on OF is also questioned, as the advertisement of sexual services is currently criminalized in Canada (Bruckert & Hannem, 2013). However, with the recent popularity of OF among influencers and celebrities, advertisement has been a significant method of gaining a following on the platform. The lack of clarification regarding advertisements on OF raises the question: Are non-sex workers who advertise sexual content on OF criminalized (if at all) similarly to sex workers? If influencers and celebrities can advertise sexual content publicly, then there is a need to re-evaluate the current laws that disadvantage and harm sex workers.

While there are benefits to celebrity engagement in activism, there are far more drawbacks when celebrities and influencers enter spaces not meant for fame (Haynes, 2014). Driessens (2012) acknowledges that the celebritization of certain platforms “has been used to denote both the mobility of celebrities within media and entertainment and the ‘migration’ of these celebrities into areas traditionally not associated with fame” (p. 644). One example of celebritization that has previously been researched is that of human trafficking activism. Celebrities involved in human trafficking activism often advertise and promote uninformed narratives, and also provide solutions without any accountability (Haynes, 2014). Further, celebrity engagement in activism does not significantly contribute to the eradication of human trafficking, while also “leading the public to believe that “doing something”—anything at all—is better than doing nothing, when the opposite may well be true” (Haynes, 2014, p. 40). In 2011, Demi Moore partnered with Tiffany's Jewelry to sell diamond handcuff pendants to showcase support for human trafficking victims. While part of the proceeds went towards an anti-trafficking foundation, little was done to diminish human trafficking itself and was criticized as “distasteful” (Haynes, 2014; O'Brien, 2018).

5.0 Bella Thorne

The celebritization of OF significantly increased with Bella Thorne’s involvement with the platform. Thorne, who is a former Disney Channel star, advertised the disclosure of sexually explicit content (i.e., nudes) on OF for a “small” price of \$200 USD. Thousands of fans and subscribers bought the supposedly nude image, which ended up being a picture of Thorne in lingerie and not the alleged photo that she had advertised. This controversy caused the platform to refund thousands of customers, but not after Thorne had already made millions from the site. Shortly after the incident, OF made major changes to its platform which included capping the number of tips a creator could receive, as well as increasing the length of time a creator would be paid (Manavis, 2020). These changes to the platform outraged many sex workers who used the site as their primary source of income, blaming Thorne for the changes in the services (Madani, Lee, & Wilson, 2020). Thorne released statements from her personal Twitter account apologizing if her actions affected sex workers and that her intentions were simply to raise awareness and normalize the sex work industry (Hoffman, 2020; Sanchez, 2022). On August 29, 2020, Thorne tweeted that she “wanted to bring attention to the site (...) [and] remove the stigma behind sex work, porn, and the natural hatred people spew ...” (@bellathorne, 2020). Although Thorne had intentions of destigmatizing sexual labour, the use of consciousness-raising in Thorne’s case simply further added to the celebritization of the OF platform and inherently harmed the sex work community.

6.0 Iggy Azalea

In January 2023, celebrity Iggy Azalea created an OF account, despite previously tweeting her views against creating OF content. In a tweet from 2021, Azalea stated “I think onlyfans can be really empowering for people, but I WILL NEVER, EVVVVER join. I don’t want to make that type of content & it only fucks up the bag for ppl

on there who really bout that life.” (@iggyazalea, 2021). Azalea acknowledged the harm she would cause to sex workers if she joined OF; however, less than two years later, Azalea launched her own OF account and used Twitter to advertise her new OF posts. On January 20th, 2023, Azalea tweeted “New drop tonight. Link in Bio” (@iggyazalea, 2023) with a 17-second teaser trailer of her upcoming posts. Although most responses to Azalea’s tweets are supportive of her OF account, there are a few that “call out” the celebrity for her contradiction. User @bummiest (2023) responded to Azalea’s “new drop” tweet with the words “remember when” and a screen capture of Azalea’s 2021 tweet claiming that she would never join OF. Another user tweeted “she’s [Iggy Azalea] simply using only fans to further build her pockets, which only bothers me (when all celebs do it) because it was a platform for SWs who may not have had another source of income” (@marahhJayy, 2023). While Azalea’s decision to join OF was met with criticism, it is hard to ignore the possibility of Azalea creating an account due to the nature of OF becoming less sexual. As previously stated, due to the increase of influencer and celebrity presence on OF, the platform has gradually moved away from explicitly sexual content. This change in content could explain Azalea’s decision to join the platform. However, similar to Bella Thorne’s involvement with OF, the use of the platform (i.e., creating non-sexual content for profit) by *any* celebrity diminishes sex workers’ opportunity for success.

7.0 Tana Mongeau

Tana Mongeau, a YouTube star, was also the target of criticism for her non-sexually explicit posts and content that are already rapidly available on her Instagram and other media accounts (Tenbarge, 2020). Many people turned to Twitter to criticize Mongeau’s OF posts, with one user tweeting “tana mongeau’s onlyfans is a scam LOL she literally charges for underboob and bikini pics that can easily be on instagram save ur money or support actual sex workers” (@emberxeve, 2020).

Another user called out both Thorne and Mongeau for their non-explicit content:

Fuck Bella Thorne & Tana Mongeau for starting an OnlyFans to SCAM people & make REAL sex workers look bad - they trick ppl into thinking they are getting XXX content & it's insulting to the consumer & to the people who actually use OnlyFans as a means to survive/ pay their bills (@fuqnicollette, 2020).

Additionally, only a few hours after joining OF, Tana Mongeau “broke the site”, after trying to host a live stream that attracted an overwhelming number of visitors (Tenbarga, 2020). At 10:39 pm, Mongeau tweeted that she was going live and attached her onlyfans link. At 11:09 pm, Mongeau responded to her previous tweet stating: “ YALL BROKE THE SITE I CANT EVEN GO LIVE RN WERE ON THE FUCKING PHONE WITH THEM!!!! BREAKING RECORDS..... hold up but just know the first live will be iconic” (@tanamongeau, 2020). After the overload on Mongeau’s platform, no representatives from OF commented on the crash nor offered solutions for future crashes. Since Mongeau’s live stream, there has been other instances where the platform has crashed, or content creators were unable to upload videos. In January 2020, the OnlyFans support team tweeted “We are aware of a recent issue some creators have experienced whilst uploading videos to OnlyFans. We have now implemented a fix but would advise any users still experiencing issues to clear their browser cache and retry (@onlyfanssupport, 2020). In a similar fashion, OnlyFans support team tweeted in May 2020 “we are currently performing maintenance works on the site and are therefore expecting some site down time. We apologise for any inconvenience this may cause and will be back online shortly once these upgrades are completed” (@onlyfanssupport, 2020). One content creator on OF tweeted the company back, stating: “Is there a compensation for this inconvenience? Because it’s like your work place is suddenly closed for two days and you’re

not getting payed. That’s definitely not ok. Things like this should have been foreseen when you guys started growing. This is people’s income! No ok!” (@BellaSwedish, 2020). The lack of compensation during the outages has not been addressed by the company and remains an issue for many content creators who rely on the platform as their primary income. The crashing of OF by influencers and the unplanned site outages highlights a need for further analysis of the celebrityization of spaces not meant for fame.

8.0 Discussion

Before the introduction of new restrictions on the platform, OF provided a safe and reliable platform in which sex workers could control their content and charge consumers a reasonable fee. Manavis (2020) wrote that “with only an initial 20 percent fee on earnings, with 80 percent going straight to creators, OnlyFans offered sex workers much better rates than most other sites, and it paid them in seven days” (para 5). After the implementation of the new restrictions, including a cap on what a creator could charge per post, most creators and sex workers could only make \$30 USD, with a limit on the number of tips one could receive (Madani, D., Lee, T., & Wilson, L, 2020) – a significant decrease from what creators were earning prior to the changes. Although OF claimed that the changes to the platform were not due to one user (i.e., Bella Thorne), many sex workers on the platform were skeptical.

More so, the popularization of influencers and celebrities on OF diminishes the success of smaller creators and sex workers who rely solely on OF as their primary source of income. Most influencers and celebrities that engage in the platform currently already have a primary source of income that is external to OF. It can be argued that using OF as a secondary source of income further eliminates opportunities for sex workers to gain popularity and extra income. Many sex workers have shared their concerns with celebrities engaging in the platform. One former sex worker claimed that "Sex work is work. Period. Actors and

professional models should not be on this site. It takes money away from hardworking people who are just trying to put food on the table and support themselves." (Heinrich, 2020, para 15). Aussie Rachel, a sex worker who had created her own OF shared her frustration with celebrities joining OF: "to witness a celebrity gentrifying a platform and making obscene amounts of money without acknowledging the plight of sex workers is truly a slap in the face," (Jennings, 2021, para 40). The involvement of celebrities on OF has also pushed sex workers out. Abby, a 21-year-old sex worker claimed that "her OnlyFans subscriptions drop every time a new celebrity joins the platform, pushing her and other existing creators down in the pecking order" (Jennings, 2021, para 37). The platform has essentially become a form of entertainment for celebrities to gain further popularity and traction in the realm of social media, while negatively impacting safe spaces meant for sex workers (Driessens, 2012).

Another issue that arose from the involvement of celebrities on OF is the fact that most of their material is not sexually explicit. As shown with the example of Bella Thorne and Iggy Azalea, their content was criticized for not being sexually explicit or different than what is already found on their Instagram pages. One Twitter user complained about the lack of nudes on Azalea's OF, which caused another Twitter user to respond: "because her only fans isn't for nudes it literally for her fans" (@yawn_NEXT, 2023). Most influencers and celebrities who engage on OF do not post sexual content, which diminishes sexual content that sex workers work hard to promote. OF is shifting away from sexually explicit content, removing the ability of sex workers to succeed. NBC News (2020) highlights one user's concerns with Thorne's involvement on the platform:

The issue with Bella Thorne benefiting from OF is that she's not a sex worker and doesn't need to turn to this site to afford to live when so many of us rely on this money and she's totally f----- us for clout for her s-

---- new movie about sex work when she has no f----- idea.

Many influencers creating an OF account are not in the field of sex work, which diminishes the success of smaller sex workers who rely on OF for their income. Australian sex worker Tilly Lawless openly shared her dislike for the platform and acknowledged the lack of income most creators are receiving: "Sure, the top 2% are making great money – including people like Bella Thorne, who posted a not-so-topless photo before OnlyFans put a cap on their pay-per-view rates, impacting the work and income of thousands of legitimate sex workers" (Lawless, Aug 2, 2021, para 6). Other celebrities that are profiting off OF include Blac Chyna, Cardi B, Bhad Bhabie, and Erica Mena.

More so, there are concerns that OF has further harmed sex workers, as non-sex workers who sell "sexual" content are praised, but sex workers on the site continue to face stigmatization. One user stated that: "[OnlyFans] destigmatized the hot chick who wants to sell some nudes. It's 'you go girl, make your money.' But those of us who are actually sex workers are still thought of as filthy whores" (Serrels, 2021, Para 42). The stigmatization and negative sentiment towards sex work is an issue that many sex-positive feminists (Bernstein, 2001; Rubin, 1984) aim to address, as current Canadian laws surrounding sex work make it difficult for any sexual act to be considered legitimate labour. The push-back from government and public agencies to acknowledge sex work as labour reinforces a harmful narrative of sex workers as "risky" subjects that encourages male violence and exploitation (Bruckert & Hannem, 2013). While online sexual labour differs from street-based sex work in terms of privacy and protection, the stigmatization surrounding both forms of labour reveal larger issues of governance and corporate interests (i.e., sexual labour is only accepted when it is beneficial to the capitalist agenda).

9.0 Conclusion

Over the past couple of years, there has been a significant demand for online services, such as sex work, due to the popularization of digital services. As previous research acknowledges, traditional street sex work has faced enormous scrutiny, as current sex work laws criminalize potential clients for communicating with sex workers; the sale of sexual services; profiting as a third party; procuring someone to engage in sexual acts; and advertisement of sexual services (Bruckert & Hannem, 2013; Snow, Steely, & Bense, 2020). These laws are not only harmful but also discriminatory against sex workers. More so, the shift towards online sexual labour allows sex workers to avoid potential physical dangers that are associated with traditional street-sex work. However, there has been a lack of research evaluating online sexual labour, specifically regarding the highly popularized OF platform. This critical commentary sought to argue that the rising celebrity and influencer presence on OF (also known as celebritization), removes the ability of sex workers to be successful. In particular, celebrity Bella Thorne's engagement with the platform overshadowed smaller creators/sex workers and changed restrictions on the platform that further harmed the ability of sex workers to earn income. More research regarding online sexual labour, the treatment of sex workers (traditional sex work and online sex work), and online sexual labour laws needs to be further explored.

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About the Author

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