

**Sex work: making a (supposed) private act public**  
How online (NSFW) content creators practice a distinction between public  
and private

Thesis MSc Engaging Public Issues

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## Abstract

The emergence of online platforms has changed how and where we work. Not just for ‘regular’ office jobs, but for sex work as well. Due to this change, sex workers can make and sell content from the comfort of their own homes, diminishing the distinction between public and private. As sex work is often already stigmatized due to the public imaginary that sex is a private act that should not be publicized (either through work or any other way), this research raises the question how Not Safe For Work (NSFW) content creators practice a distinction between public and private. To answer this question, theory on the bodily and spatial performance of a public self is used. By interviewing content creators who sell explicit content on the popular platform OnlyFans, this research provides a theoretical analysis of the public-private distinction as practically enacted in everyday sex work practices. Through literature on persona (both emotional and physical) and space-making, it can be concluded that most creators make very few changes in their appearance as part of their physical persona, but more so focus on the emotional persona and space-making aspects. In practicing the distinction between public and private, there are three different categories within the creators: boundary enforcers, boundary crossers, and boundary improvisors.

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# 1. Introduction

## A new digital infrastructure

The 2000s marked the beginning of a new era, *the digital age*. With the emergence of the platform-based ecosystems, new markets have been created. This has resulted in the so-called “platformization”. These digital platforms can be defined as online places where social and economic interactions are mediated (Acs, Song, Szerb, Audretsch & Komlosi, 2021, p.1635). A world full of new possibilities has been opened up; from delivering or using services, to consuming information or entertainment (Xue, Tian & Zhao, 2020). This is all formed with algorithms, forming an infrastructure on which platform-based markets operate. The existence of this infrastructure and well-known digital platforms such as Google and Facebook give the opportunity for other platforms to be built as well. Examples one might think of are marketplaces like Amazon, Etsy, or Bol. Relatively newer platforms are businesses like Airbnb and Uber (which has led to the term ‘uberization’), which have reshaped the so called ‘gig economy’, often referred to as the platform economy (Kenney & Zysman, 2016; Xue, Tian & Zhao, 2020). These platforms have changed work and the way we view work; where we work no longer matters, as all one needs to work on these platforms is a relatively stable internet connection (Groen, Kilhoffer, Lenaerts & Salez, 2017; Healy, Nicholson & Pekarek, 2017; Kenney & Zysman, 2019). Flexibility has become increasingly important, which has become very apparent since the COVID-19 pandemic (McGuinness, 2023).

Another platform that has been getting more and more popular, is OnlyFans. The subscription-based sites give creators the opportunity to share content behind a paywall, making it possible for them to make money from the comfort of their own home, on their own time (Berntstein, 2019). A lot of “not suitable for work” (henceforth: NSFW) content

creators have found the site and use it to sell their explicit content and to interact with their customers (called 'fans' on the website) for money.

## Sex work

Commercialized sex work has been around for many years, resulting in different types of sex work forming the sex work industry (Leigh, 2010). Examples are pornography, prostitution, stripping, and now online content creation as well, with the latter growing in popularity. Ever since OnlyFans started, there has been plenty of news coverage on how much money NSFW creators make on the platform (Business Insider, 2023; Helms, 2023; Smythe, 2023). The internet seems to be fascinated with how much money can be made by selling content. After all, to many it seems like an easy way to get rich; all you need is a smartphone with a camera, and you can sell content from the comfort of your own home (Bernstein, 2019).

However, it isn't all as glamorous as it may seem. Not only do most content creators make less money than is written about in these articles (worldwide, OnlyFans creators earn approximately €150, - a month (Kenney & Zysman, 2019; NOS, 2022)), but platform work itself has its downsides as well. Some literature suggests that the rise of online platforms and this new type of labor changes working conditions, such as a greater risk for individual workers, and more emotional labor (See, among others: Healy, Nicholson & Pekarek, 2017; Barbour and Marshall, 2019; Giles, 2020; Jackson, 2020; Cardoso & Scarcelli, 2021; Safae, 2021).

In addition, as sex work differs from the public imaginary of other forms of work, it has been stigmatized. Some might even go as far as saying it is immoral (Scambler, 2007). This stigma has formed the way we write and talk about sex work, as has been well documented in research on sex work (Weitzer, 2017).

An often-heard argument is that sex is something that should be a private act, yet this act is now made public through sex work. So, the question is not whether sex work should be deemed as ‘good’ or ‘bad’, but how public can be distinguished from private. Now that sex workers have gained more opportunities to work from out of their private home, for example via OnlyFans, this question becomes more prominent. Because how private is it truly, for them to create content from their own homes?

### Problem statement and research question

The distinction between public and private might seem clear to some, as a lot of people associate ‘outside the home’ with public, and ‘inside the home’ with private. This distinction, while often assumed, is in fact a more complex accomplishment, created through infrastructures, legal formats, spatial design practices, and upheld in common, cultural conceptions of social life (Warner, 2002). In recent years, the platform economy has obscured the distinction; we can work from home and share videos and pictures from within these private places.

When it comes to sex work, one might say that the emergence of platforms like OnlyFans has made sex work more private: customers no longer have to go out in public to strip clubs or public porn screenings to meet their sexual desires, but can do so from the comfort of their own home (Weitzer, 2010; Bernstein, 2019). On the other hand, online sex work simultaneously invites the customer into the homes of sex workers, albeit virtually, potentially subjecting them to more scrutiny. So, the question remains how current content creators handle this problem. To find an answer to this, this research aims to answer the following research question: *how do NSFW content creators on OnlyFans practice a distinction between private and public?*

## Relevance

As news stories have been popping up everywhere about how much money can be made by selling NSFW content on OnlyFans, the downsides to the job seem to be left untouched by general media. This way of reporting degrades the effort that NSFW content creators put into their work, leading others to believe that it is ‘easy money’ (Kenney & Zysman, 2019). Not only can this encourage many to use platforms like OnlyFans without knowing how much work it will truly be, but it also enforces the idea that creators can make money by doing little to no work. Besides this, the research can give creators more insight in ways to enact a distinction between public and private. In some cases, they might wish to practice a clearer distinction, for example due to the possibility of stalkers.

While literature on OnlyFans has been growing in recent years (see for example Van der Nagel, 2021; Easterbrook-Smith, 2022), very little has been written about the implication that the platformization of sex work has for the distinction between public and private. This thesis can add to the existing literature by analyzing how NSFW content creators practice this distinction. The focus hereby lies on the perspectives and practices of the creators themselves. The research gives an insight into role-taking and public persona of online sex workers, as well as material practices such as space-making.

A critique on research of sex work is that it often focuses on the stigma around the work, instead of focusing on sex work as *work* (Abott, 2013). By conducting this research, more insight can be given into what efforts go into the work of online NSFW content creation, as the focus lies on the labor itself.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### Public vs. Private

At the basis of this theoretical framework, is the distinction between public and private.

While the distinction between the two might appear simple, it is actually very complex. One of the reasons for this, is the existence of different conceptions of public and private. A common definition of the public sphere is a space of appearance where people can come together for interactions, but there is a lot more to uncover. One might take on the notions of public and private by Hannah Arendt and Jurgen Habermas, who focus on political spheres (Sennett, 2020). Another way to think of the distinction is as a spatial one, with for example the home being a private space and ‘outside of the home’ public (Birch, 2007). Furthermore, the distinction between public and private can be represented by how we, as people, act; the persona we take on whenever we are in certain places or settings (Moore, Barbour & Marshall, 2019). These last two notions of the distinction can be combined in a bodily and spatial performance of a public self, which is what this research focuses on.

When the distinction between private and public is based on a spatial distinction, it is based on architecture. The focus hereby lies on the house, seen as a private space for the family. In earlier times (and nowadays in some cultures) this was made visible in the way women were expected to behave in public: all women needed to guard their sexual reputation when not in a private space (i.e., anytime they left the house) (Landes, 2003). But still, a private conversation can take place in a public market, or a public gathering can take place in someone’s private kitchen (Warner, 2002). Taking on a more historical perspective, the distinction between public and private architectural spaces have changed hand in hand with how we perceive work, which has changed throughout history. Looking back at times where day-to-day life was task-oriented and done from within the (proximity of) the home, there used to be little demarcation between “work” (public) and “life” (private) (Thompson, 1967).



Nowadays, in most cases, work takes place outside of the home, in an office or someplace like a construction site. So, what if someone makes content from the privacy of their home, but publicly sells it online?

When someone uses their private space for public means, they can make material changes to their space and make it less personal and create a clearer distinction between the two. Another way to create a clearer distinction, is by enacting a persona, a formation of the public self (Moore, Barbour & Marshall, 2019).

To see how the distinction between public and private plays a role in sex work, it is important to have more background information on sex work, more specifically *online* sex work.

### Making sex public

Prostitution has been around since primitive societies. Even back then, women engaged in transactional sex. This can be seen in ancient Egypt and Greece, which is often written about (Ditmore, 2005). Despite this, the term *sex work* did not exist until 1979. The term was coined by (then prostitute) Carol Leigh, to create a discourse inclusive of the women working in the trades, and to get away from the stigmatized term prostitution (Leigh, 2010). It helps to convey professionalism, and for sex workers to be seen as actual workers (Grant, 2014).

Throughout history, there have been different perspectives on sex work. While it might have been accepted in ancient Greece for example, sex work was condemned in 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe, as a result of the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation. With violence against women at an all-time high, women were expected to stay at home and refrain from the public (Ditmore, 2005).

What acts should be displayed privately and what publicly, is always a matter of discussion. Especially with sex work, some who are opposed to the profession might argue

that sex is a private matter, not something to be commercialized in the public (whether that be 'in real life' or online): it is something done in the bedroom, therefore for no one else to see. However, even in public, sex can be seen all around us. Queer studies show us how heteronormativity has become a norm in modern society. As Berlant and Warner (1998) state: "Heteronormativity is more than ideology, or prejudice, or phobia against gays and lesbians; it is produced in almost every aspect of forms and arrangements of social life: nationality, the state, and the law; commerce; medicine; and education; as well as in the conventions and effects of narrativity, romance, and other protected spaces of culture" (pp. 554-555). Yet at the same time, due to the normalization of heterosexuality, intimacy has become linked to the personal life. Aside from the fact that sex acts should be shielded by privacy according to heterosexual norms, it has become a condition of personhood, rather than 'just an act' (Berlant & Warner, 1998).

In his book *Publics and Counterpublics*, Warner (2002) Describes how Greek philosopher Diogenes used to make a habit of "doing anything in public, the works of Demeter and Aphrodite alike" (p. 21); for anything sexual for example, instead of moving to a private place, he would go to the central market of Athens. This was his way of challenging the morality of public and private, and despite him doing so more than two thousand years ago, not much has changed. Heteronormativity has decided what sides of sex are okay to show, and which sides are not. For example, it is very common to see two mixed-sex people kissing in public, yet when two same-sex persons kiss or even hold hands in public, they are often met with a much more negative reaction (Warner, 2002, p.24).

### Current changes in sex work

Ever since the term sex work came along, commercial sex is being reinvented (Grant, 2014). The rise of the internet has put a new sector on the market: internet-facilitated sex work.

Literature describes this change as a privatization of sexual services, as customers no longer have to go into public places like strip clubs to acquire the sexual attention they might want, but can do so from the privacy of their own home (Weitzer, 2010; Bernstein, 2019). This all started by the emergence of the platform economy, which has given way for sites such as Uber, Airbnb and OnlyFans.

Where OnlyFans workers differ from those working on platforms as Uber, is the form of work; Uber workers can be defined as platform mediated workers, whereas OnlyFans workers are defined as platform-mediated content creators (Kenney & Zysman, 2019). In addition to this, for OnlyFans, creators are vital to its success: without creators, there are no users. However, this also means that the creators bear all the risks (Vallas & Schor, 2020). They basically own a small market within the platform, where they offer their content (Kenney & Zysman, 2019). This means the creators are fully responsible for how much they upload and what they charge (Gandini, 2019).

### Sex work on OnlyFans

As mentioned earlier, a common distinction between public and private is that work takes place in 'public', while life at home is 'private'. For sex workers it might be the case that they work in a brothel or a strip club for example, but this distinction diminishes once the sex workers make content from their own home.

Platforms such as OnlyFans can be defined as multisided platforms; they facilitate exchanges through direct transactions between workers and customers. These types of platforms are focused on service and human interactions (Acs et al, 2021). This emphasizes the importance of emotional labor, a term that originates from sociologist Arlie Russel Hochschild's book *The Managed Heart* (1979). It refers to managing your own emotions as is required by your profession, such as any stress, anxiety or other emotions caused by your

job (Safae, 2021). Emotional labor is a big part of the service industry; workers must be kind and respectful, no matter how difficult a customer might be. In the platform economy, emotional labor is even more important. As your income is dependent on the amount of ‘fans’ you have and how well people rate you, the pressure to maintain good relationships with all your customers may drive some to work more than they should (Safae, 2021). Online sex workers must create a feeling of intimacy with their customers. Customer relations is a part of the self-branding (Cardoso, Chronaki & Scarcelli, 2022).

With creators using platforms like OnlyFans to sell their NSFW content and to talk to customers from their own home, it is hard to see what exactly is made public and what remains private. This raises the question how the sex workers themselves make this distinction. However, literature on persona studies can help explore this distinction. As Moore, Barbour and Marshall (2019) state in their work on *persona studies*: “In a sense, online culture (...) have produced an elaborate reconfiguration of what constitutes public and private space and activity.” (p. 2). To deal with this, people create what is called an ‘online persona’ (or sometimes several). Whatever we decide to share through media, is a formation of a public self.

Jackson (2020) studied persona in content creators by researching Twitch streamers. These streamers create and present a carefully curated version of themselves, which is often created partially through interaction with fans. The creators are constantly performing, but never showing the individual itself. Often this includes changing their appearance while online. This is needed for content creators to seem more authentic, and to appeal to their audience, without making it noticeable that the persona they present online is fabricated (Giles, 2020; Jackson, 2020; Cardoso & Scarcelli, 2021). Some even go as far as using a virtual generated avatar (known as ‘VTubing’) of which they can decide the appearance, making it that the streamers themselves don’t have to appear on camera (Rokoko, 2021).

With personas, individuals are constantly producing different versions of themselves, as if it were a performance. One might behave differently within a friend group than with family or colleagues (Senft, 2008; Moore et al, 2019). While in real life this distinction can be made with physical boundaries, it's difficult to compartmentalize our persona online. While it's possible to make new online accounts for each version of yourself, this might be frowned upon (Senft, 2008, p.7-8).

Just imagine the sex worker as an actor, customers as an audience and the work environment as a stage. It is possible for workers to take on two types of acting when it comes to emotional labor: 'surface acting' or 'deep acting'. Surface acting can be seen as giving a fake smile to a customer, without personally identifying with the feeling her character is portraying. In deep acting, the worker tries to identify with the feelings that are needed to keep customers satisfied, either consciously or unconsciously (Senft, 2008, p.9).

One of the reasons sex workers might feel the need to create an online persona, is due to the interactive nature of the platform. Workers are more susceptible to stress-related problems, such as burn-out. Constant new market entrants mean that the creators need to stay engaged 24/7, trying to prevent losing 'fans' (Kenney & Zysman, 2019).

To operationalize the concept of persona, Cardoso and Scarcelli (2021) interviewed several (Italian) NSFW OnlyFans creators. They researched how the creators prepared their physical appearance before shooting, such as how they did their hair and makeup, whether they exercise and diet, and how they pose. This study however did not engage with the broader question how these practices are mobilized to enact a distinction between the public persona and the private self. In this thesis, then, it is specifically highlighted *how* this distinction is navigated.

### 3. Methodology

To find out how online content creators practice a distinction between public and private, qualitative research in the form of interviews is conducted. This research takes on a constructivist philosophical worldview, which believes that the world is complex and could be understood through open-ended interview questions. By doing this, participants are given the opportunity to share their perspectives, which can be interpreted by the researcher (Creswell & Creswell, 2022, p. 46). This forms phenomenological research, where the researcher can describe the lived experiences of individuals, as described by interviewed participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2022, p.50).

#### Case

While there are several online platforms that facilitate different forms of online sex work, OnlyFans seems to be the one most known among the general public. The U.K. based company was founded by Tim Stokely in 2016, as a platform where creators can share pictures and videos to fans for a monthly payment or for a pay-per-view (Nijssen, 2020).

Over the years, the site has become a staple in online content creation: no matter what type of content you want to buy, you can find it on OnlyFans. From fitness instructions, fashion, and baking content, to NSFW content. It can be compared to any other social media platform, the only difference being the paywall. Creators can decide whether they want to set a monthly subscription price, or if they want to set a paywall for each individual post (Safaei, 2021).

While the platform does not solely focus on sex workers, many (both professional and amateur) have found their way to the website. One of the major reasons for this, is the nudity policy. As the site is exclusively for adults, there is no concern of underage posting and thus nudity is allowed. This age requirement is enforced through several controls: consumers need

to fill in their credit card details, and creators need to confirm their identity with a photo of an identification document (passport, ID or driver's license) and a photo of them holding said identification document (Safae, 2021).

Integral to the platform, is the "creator-fan" relationship: customers can chat with the creators and request certain content (Safae, 2021). Fans feel as if they have a personal connection with the creator, often resulting in a parasocial relationship; some creators give little insights into their day-to-day life. This gives the feel of intimacy, which subscribers can't find in general porn. This makes the platform interesting for the research conducted in this thesis: emotional labor becomes very apparent in the 'relationship' part of the platform.

## Data collection

For this research, all data was collected through semi-structured interviews and then analyzed based on a grounded theory framework (Bryman, 2016). A total of ten interviews were conducted for this research. This form of interviewing gives the opportunity to discuss theoretical concepts, but also leaves some leeway to change the questions based on the conversation and the respondent (Creswell & Poth, 2017). It is important to remain flexible during the interviews, to make sure that the respondents are comfortable and to leave some room for new insights that they might bring up. During the interviews, participants were asked about four different topics that give more insight in the concepts of space-making and persona: OnlyFans as a platform, their appearance while creating content (physical persona), their embodied practices of public self-presentation while working (emotional persona), and the environment(s) in which they create content. The topic list used for the interviews can be found in the appendix. As an additional form of data collection, respondents were asked if they are willing to share an (anonymized) picture of their usual working environment. This visual material was analyzed as part of the research (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p.163).

Due to the fact that the respondents are from different countries, all interviews are conducted online, using MS-Teams. Participants have the choice to either keep their camera on or off. As body language is an important part of interviewing, keeping the camera off might have negative implications (Babbie, 2013). However, it is more important for the participants to feel comfortable and to actively protect their anonymity. Thus, when a participant decides to keep their camera turned off during an interview, nonverbal cues need to be analyzed. Examples of this are longer pauses before or while talking, choppy speech, and reluctance. During all interviews, the technique of probing will be applied. This means that nondirective phrases or questions are used to encourage people to elaborate on their answers (Babbie, 2013, p.269).

During the interviews (and while writing this thesis), it is important to realize that the use of certain words reinforces the stigma and prejudices on sex work. To avert from this problematic language, *The Reimagining Sex Work Media guide*<sup>1</sup> by the Dutch feminist activist collective *Reimagining Sex Work* is followed (n.d.). Sex workers, academics, photographers, and journalists collaborated to make this guide, which helps the aforementioned groups to portray a more nuanced, honest, and complete picture of sex work in the media (Reimagining Sex Work, n.d.).

To be able to analyze the data, the interviews are recorded and transcribed, making them completely anonymous. Thereafter the transcriptions are analyzed using open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Bryman, 2016). While the coding process is not exactly linear, it can be described as a progression: open coding is the first step, used to break data down into discrete parts and identifying concepts (in this case, focused on the public and the private). Axial coding goes a step further and aims to identify the core concepts and to

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<sup>1</sup> Original name (in Dutch): de Reimiaging Sex Work Mediagids: Handleiding vóór journalisten en sekswerkers dóór journalisten en sekswerkers.



regroup the data. Selective coding can be seen as the last step, in which the central code of the study is identified (Babbie, 2013, p. 389).

## Sampling

All respondents are found through social media such as Twitter and Reddit, with the use of criterion sampling (Bryman, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2017, p.159). Direct messages were sent to a large group of individuals; it is uncertain to know how many NSFW content creators exactly were reached. However, it can be stated with certainty that around 300 or more possible respondents were approached. There were also several creators who responded to the initial message, but then stopped replying during the follow-up or unfortunately did not show up to the scheduled interview.

While having diversity among respondents is important, certain factors made it impossible to guarantee diversity: 1. Some accounts are private or do not have any pictures; 2. More often than not, aliases are used instead of real names; and 3. Accounts barely state where they live due to privacy. This, along with a low response rate, left little to no room to select respondents based on characteristics such as age or experience on OnlyFans.

There are several reasons for the low response rate. First off, a lot of sex workers have struggled the last years due to COVID-19, and simply do not have the time to spend on unpaid academic participation. A second reason is that due to the stigma around the work, not everyone is comfortable with being interviewed and revealing themselves to a researcher. A third reason is that, since the messages were sent out through social media, not everyone felt inclined to respond to a message from someone they did not know.

## Ethics and privacy

Before the interviews, the respondents are handed or read an *informed-consent* form, which states practical information on privacy, such as anonymity and the handling of data. Any personal information on the respondents is anonymized, making the data untraceable to the respondent. All respondents have the possibility to withdraw their participation at any point. All data gathered from the respondents is stored in OneDrive.

It is important to note that due to the stigma around sex work, not everyone is willing to openly talk about their work. Anonymity and privacy are emphasized at the start of every interview, to make the respondents more comfortable in answering the questions. All respondents are given the option to retract their words, to make sure they are comfortable with what information is being used as data.

As sex work has not been legalized everywhere, there is a possibility that some respondents might not feel comfortable sharing more about their identity than needed (i.e., their full name and nationality). For this reason, it is possible for respondents to sign their *informed-consent* form under an alias or only give a spoken consent. This means the research relies on descriptions of locations and identities that might not be completely true.

## Positionality statement

To make sure the research is done ethically, it is important to be considerate and not appropriate the voices of others/those who are researched. And while power imbalances and other limitations cannot be removed by reflexivity, it can make us more aware of them. As Kim England (1994) states: “The researcher cannot conveniently tuck away the personal behind the professional, because fieldwork *is* personal. (...). A researcher is positioned by her/his gender, age, race/ethnicity, sexual identity, and so on, as well as by their biography, all of which may inhibit or enable certain research method insights in the field.” (p. 249).

As this research takes on a constructivist philosophical worldview, I interpret the perspectives from the respondents. The findings are *my* interpretations, as a woman who is not in any way involved in online (NSFW) content creation. My own (in)experience with the work has shaped the process of this thesis. Especially when reaching out to possible respondents, I noticed it was somewhat confronting to approach people through their NSFW-accounts. The first thing I saw of the respondents, was their persona. This only made it more important to get to know the person behind the persona.

## 4. Results

Before analyzing the results, it is important to get a better idea of *who* the respondents are.

How did they end up as an online content creator? Is it their fulltime job?

To most, online content creation is not their sole income. Either they have another job, or they do other forms of (either in-person or online) sex work as well. This means the time respondents spend on their work varies. Depending on how much the respondents post, this can take anywhere from a few hours to full 8-hour workdays. That being said, the job is not for just anyone. Many onlookers might think of the work as easy – as just snapping a picture – yet it is much more. As some respondents put it: it’s a business. Setting goals, laying out daily tasks and scheduling posts. Besides, due to the sexual nature of the work, it might not be for everyone, as Indy states:

“So, I feel like people that are not kinky in this way (...) and only want to get in for the money, they will have like a really bad time because at the end of the day this is who you are. If you enjoy doing this, this is you. This is who you are and it ends up being intertwined (...) with this type of work.” – Indy

Some have started out doing NSFW online content creation simply because they gained an online following and were asked for certain content, or because they just wanted to give it a try: “It actually started as a bit of a joke. Two years ago, it [OnlyFans] was a hype and my best friend told me I should do it.” (Amber)<sup>2</sup>. To others, as stated earlier, it is a new form of sex work that they decided to try out:

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<sup>2</sup> This quote was originally in Dutch. See *appendix 2* for the original quote and translation.

“I've been doing sex work since I was 18 years old. I started out doing in-person sex work and probably around like 2017/2018 I started doing online sex work (...). I didn't like the anxiety I get from meeting in person, even though (...) after doing online sex work for so long, I actually enjoyed doing in person a lot. (...) there's always going to be that kind of anxiety and so I kind of preferred being able to stay at home.” - Hannah

One of the reasons respondents have chosen NSFW content creation over other forms of sex work, is due to the ‘freedom’ it gives them. Creators can decide what to post, what level of nudity they are comfortable with and how much interaction they wish to have with fans. While some decide to share pornographic content, others don’t go much further than what can be described as ‘lewd.’ Besides that, some respondents preferred not doing in-person work as it gives them more anxiety, or because, as Lynn responded: “I can almost put on an act more online than in person.”

While NSFW content creation can be seen as a form of sex work, not everyone refers to themselves as a sex worker. This contrasts with the idea of *why* the term was coined: to include everyone doing sex work, whether that be in-person or online (Leigh, 2010). However, two respondents mentioned preferring the term ‘creator’, as they feel it better represents them and their work:

“I do prefer creator because - some people will call themselves a sex worker, and I don't feel totally comfortable calling myself that, even though that is true. And like, this is a form of sex work. But I think I just like the term creator more, because it I guess it feels a little bit more comfortable to me. (...) it is all about always creating new content or it is like a very creative type of a job. And so I kind of see it as that. And as an entrepreneur, I also see myself as an entrepreneur too.” - Cassie

No matter how the respondents describe themselves or how they ended up as a creator, all have their ways to maintain a distinction between public and private.

### Doing a public self and managing the private

There have often been discussions on whether sexual content should be public or private, and now the emergence of platforms like OnlyFans has added more complexity. With creators sharing content from within private places such as their homes, instead of a professional studio, new dimensions are added to the discussion. What is okay to be seen on camera? What should someone keep private? And what about the – sometimes very personal – conversations they have with their subscribers? Of course, the answers to these questions differ per person.

The respondents have different perspectives on privacy and anonymity. Where some creators keep their privacy and anonymity in mind with everything they do – from shooting content to talking to subscribers – others do not seem to be bothered with this. The following quotes are clear examples (about privacy pertaining to either subscribers or friends and family) of these two opposites; Cassie, for instance, states: “I wanted to remain private. My privacy is really important to me.” Indy contrasts this, by stating the following:

“I believe that if someone is not that ready to commit to this type of work, they won't really share personal stuff. And from my own point of view, I feel like you couldn't do this job if you'd wanted to necessarily keep it a secret, like a second type of life, because it will eat you up. (...) I think it becomes toxic when you don't want to accept the fact that this is part of yourself too.” - Indy

To get a better understanding of how creators decide what info to share, they were asked about their personal social media. Most of the respondents mentioned that they made new social media accounts when they started sex work, to separate this from their personal account. This could be because they don't want their friends and family finding their OnlyFans, or because they don't want their subscribers to find their personal account. Others do not seem to mind sharing their personal social media with some subscribers, or have fully intertwined the two:

“My account started off as private and then, with the more followers I gained, I made it public because I had to accept like hundreds and hundreds of followers a day. (...) it was just easier to leave it public.” - Mia

One of the reasons some decide to keep their social media accounts separate, is due to the possibility of stalkers. Especially since some subscribers form a parasocial relationship with the creators they are subscribed to: “I know other people who have had stalkers. (...). That just makes me feel really unsafe. I try and really lower that risk. (...) I choose not to even share (...) what part of the country I live in.” (Cassie). The same respondent also shared that she once had an interaction with someone who had apparently found their (private) account on a dating app, leading her to share less information on the account. On the complete opposite site of the spectrum is Emma, who seems unfazed by the possibility of a stalker:

“I tell them my real name. (...) I had a lot of stalkers, and I had a few scary stalkers. And one thing that you learn is if you are a public person, people will find your name anyways. You can conceal it as much as you want, but there's always a trace to back to your real name. (...).

If people want to find you, they will find you.” - Emma

In a similar fashion, Hannah stated that no matter how hard you try to remain anonymous, there is always the possibility of someone finding out your personal information:

“It keeps you a lot safer when it doesn't feel like you're trying to hide things. If people who want to hurt you feel like you're trying to hide things, then they'll use those things against you. (...). If people want to ruin your life, they will ruin your life.” – Hannah

Hannah mentioned a personal experience with a stalker, who had found her family's contact information and started threatening to send them her explicit content if she would not comply to the stalkers' wishes. Another respondent mentioned this as one of the reasons why she never tells her fans about her family and stopped using LinkedIn: “Some people see it as a challenge to go and find them on social media or something. (...), which is why I am no longer active on LinkedIn, because they go looking for you and who your employer is.” (Amber)<sup>3</sup>.

There are clear differences in the use of personal social media. This only goes to show that each respondent has a different view on the distinction between public and private. To some it might even mean creating a whole new persona.

### Use of persona

“I think there's not a day that passes in which I do not use my persona, or when I don't encounter something from this world. I think I'm completely engulfed in it by now.” - Indy

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<sup>3</sup> This quote was originally in Dutch. See *appendix 2* for the original quote and translation.



Persona is a formation of a public self, which can manifest itself in both physical appearance and behavior (Moore et al, 2019; Jackson, 2020). For example, Indy mentions how her creator persona is almost the same as her private self, “but a little bit more bubbly and a little bit more bimbo.” Thus, she changes her behavior when talking to her subscribers. But first, how does one create this ‘new’ public self? Because, as Brian states: “I would find it too difficult to try and like come up with a character.”

Creating a persona often starts with the name: do you want to use your real name, a derivation of your name, or a completely new name? To most, coming up with a new name is a way to stay anonymous, to keep their subscribers from finding them or their family members. Or, as one of the respondents stated, “... because I like to filter a little bit of the a\*\*holes coming in on my personal life" (Indy). All but two of the respondents use a pseudonym for their work. Emma, who has two different persona’s (one as a sex worker and one as a Twitch streamer) uses the name, or as she calls it ‘brand’, to separate the two:

“When you have a brand like it's like a public person, you could say that's a content creator, but they have a brand. (...) the brand is the person that you created or the person that you are.

(...) there's a difference between them [the two brands].” - Emma

As the quotation already shows, persona is more than just a name. It might include changing your appearance, changing the way you talk or act. Hence, the respondents were asked about their process of getting ready, either for shooting content or to talk to subscribers.

### *Physical persona*

Whether someone decides to change their appearance or not, does not play a big role in persona creation among the respondents. It is more personal preference of the creator, if they spend time doing their makeup or hair. For example, Charlotte states: “I like getting dolled up. I like to feel sexy; it makes me feel really good”. Some respondents mention they put on more heavy makeup before shooting content, as it shows better on camera.

However, to some, changes in their appearance are dependent on their niche. As one of the respondents mentioned: “I guess my niche that I come across as is like the girl next door. I'm just like someone that they could imagine being neighbors with or working with or going to school with” (Cassie). To keep up with her fans’ expectations, Cassie barely changes anything to her appearance. The public persona pretends to be the everyday, private persona. It was mentioned earlier that it is important for a persona to feel authentic, both when it comes to personality/performance and appearance (Giles, 2020; Jackson, 2020; Cardoso & Scarcelli, 2021). However, the literature focuses on *changing* one’s appearance in order to employ their persona, while in cases of a niche like ‘the girl next door’, as Cassie mentioned, creators opt for not changing anything at all.

Another respondent mentioned that she recently started creating SM (sodomasochism) content, despite it not being something she is personally into: “If you ask me, I’m personally not into it, but they like it. It is not something I would actually do in private.” (Amber). The outfits she puts on for these shoots, are purely for her persona. This is a clear case of surface acting: Amber does not identify with the ‘character’ she is portraying, but purely keeps up a performance (Senft, 2008).

To some, getting ready by changing their appearance is not only about looking good, but also a way to mentally prepare for the content creation: “That's what the whole like

getting ready thing. It's more of a ritual to prepare myself kind of thing. So obviously I'm looking nice for the shoot. At the same time, I'm like, right, it's time to work.” (Mia).

This adds on to the research that was conducted by Cardoso and Scarcelli (2021), who operationalized the concept of persona. They did not engage with how these practices are mobilized to enact a distinction between the public persona and private self; by combining the physical and emotional aspect of persona, it can be concluded that getting ready physically helps to mentally prepare for the performance of their persona.

### *Emotional persona*

“Sometimes it's more just about connection instead of just a sexual conversation.” - Emma

Emotional labor is a big part of online sex work (Safaei, 2021). Not only do creators feel the need to keep in touch with their subscribers to prevent losing them, but they also risk fans developing parasocial relationships. This leads to subscribers sometimes asking very personal questions. So, how does one handle these conversations?

One has to be wary when it comes to answering personal questions. As one of the respondents puts it: “It's a fine line for me between managing being really authentic in doing this and being safe. Because I know there are people who have had really bad experiences that have made them feel unsafe and I don't want to do that.” (Charlotte). Some might opt for giving fake answers, almost as if they were acting – not being their true self: “I would have to be fake, essentially. Yeah, I'd have to kind of like put on (...) the creator personality and just tell them what they want to hear.” (Cassie). However, most respondents mentioned they prefer not to give fake answers, instead being genuine in their conversations. During these conversations they might not share their deepest, darkest secrets, but the creators don't mind

talking about their personal interests or how their day was. Only one of the respondents stood out, saying that she shares more personal information as the subscriber has shown more commitment to her: “I’m just this person that overshares usually as well (...) I just like using my personality and my honesty a lot.” (Indy). In this case, not only the public persona is monetized, but the private self as well. In a way, this can be related to deep acting (Senft, 2008): the respondent mentioned she likes to stay close to herself, but still has to mentally prepare to do so.

Most times, however, it is the subscriber who shares too much personal information. As mentioned before, some subscribers form a parasocial relationship, thinking that the creator they’re subscribed to is their friend. This can lead to some uncomfortable conversations for the creators:

“I’ve had some people talk to me about how they're suicidal and things like that. First of all, like that's sad, I can't help you with that unfortunately. I am a stranger. So yeah, it'll basically be me redirecting them to go speak to someone close to them about it.” – Mia

The word ‘lonely’ was mentioned very often, as the respondents talked about their usual conversations: most subscribers feel lonely and want intimacy and interaction. This is where subscribing to individual NSFW creators differ from other porn: there is interaction and more personality. And while some creators base their online persona off their own personality and like to stay close to their private self (thus, in a way, monetizing the private self), others prefer to act *as if* they are representing their authentic selves – while in reality, they are putting on a performance. This is a clear example of the big role that customer relations play in self-branding (Safae, 2021; Cardoso et al, 2022).

The performance a creator gives, can differ per request from their subscribers. Especially in custom videos or roleplaying chat, a creator can be asked for something that they are personally not into. Their subscribers project certain ideas and fantasies onto them, leading the creator to reduce the complexity of their private self; “It’s a dehumanization of sex workers, and the idea that you can do anything if you pay for it.” (Sophie)<sup>4</sup>. In some cases, the subscribers’ request might even go as far as ask for roleplay focused on incest or pedophilia. This is an extreme example of emotional labor that can cause emotions such as stress and anxiety (Safae, 2021).

### Space-making

To focus on the spatial distinction between public and private, respondents were asked not only where they shoot their content, but also how they prepare the space. Some of these decisions might be to comply to OnlyFans’ rules, for example that no pets are allowed.

### *Where to shoot*

While most respondents usually shoot content within their own home, two of the respondents differed from this. One uses Airbnb’s, as she’s traveling around the world. The other respondent, has set a very clear boundary that she (no longer) wants to shoot inside of her own home, opting for hotel rooms instead:

“When I’m at home, I want to be myself. I don’t want to be a creator in that way. I also feel like our home is special to us as a couple. (...) I want this to be our space, like as much as myself. And I feel like if I go somewhere else, I can kind of be that creator there, and then come home and be myself again.” - Cassie

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<sup>4</sup> This quote was originally in Dutch. See *appendix 2* for the original quote and translation.

Some respondents mentioned that while they primarily shoot content in their own homes, they sometimes go to another location. This can be because they have a specific theme in mind, or because a change of scenery helps to get more creative, as Hannah states:

“I get bored of my place, so if I'm not creatively able to come up with anything to do in my own unit anymore and I feel like everything's starting to look the same or it's boring, then I try something different.” – Hannah

This other location can be a hotel or Airbnb, but also a professional studio.

“I actually don't like doing like professional studio shoots and stuff cause they're very kind of clinical, almost like, very kind of like sterile in a way. You're there to create a product” –

Brian

However, as Sophie stated during her interview, you cannot shoot content just anywhere, especially not outside:

“A location where you won't be interrupted by strangers. So, in public isn't really a good option. (...). I think consent is very important, so I don't want to shock anyone with a fetish-thing when they haven't agreed to that.” – Sophie<sup>5</sup>

While others might not go as far as renting a different space to shoot their content, there are certain things that most respondents keep in mind when shooting. When deciding where to shoot within their own home, natural light plays an important role: “I'll normally choose by

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<sup>5</sup> This quote was originally in Dutch. See *appendix 2* for the original quote and translation.

where the light is. (...) That's the main choice.” (Hannah). This means that most creators don't confine themselves to only one room, but rather use the whole place.

When there is a lack of natural light, creators can opt for artificial light:

“I have big ring lights as well, so I'll set those up wherever I'm planning to shoot. And if I'm shooting in front of a mirror, or have that angled a certain way, so basically just to make the background look less busy. (...). Sometimes I'll turn on my strip lights, so I'll have different colours going on. Stuff like that. So I basically turn it into like a media, a mini photo studio.” – Mia

### *What to (not) shoot*

Of course, there are other things than lightning that the creators keep in mind when they create content. First off, most respondents mentioned not wanting any personal belongings in frame. For example, pictures of family and friends were mentioned as something respondents wouldn't want visible on camera. Only one respondent mentioned having pictures in her backdrop and not hiding this. But, in most cases, respondents would agree to the following: “Anything (...) that could easily identify who I am in real life. (...) Anything that has the potential to remove my anonymity, it goes.” (Charlotte). Same thing goes for anything that would identify friends or family members. Another respondent stated she is always careful about the possibility of a street sign being in the background, wary of accidentally revealing where she lives.

Something that goes hand in hand with keeping personal belongings out of frame, is having a clean background. To most, this means cleaning the room, because as Charlotte puts it: “Things that are distracting don't make things sexy, right?” For some, creating a clean background even influences how they decorate their homes and what furniture they buy: “I

have quite a lot of decorations, because I have some small lamps hanging, and a tapestry with a big lunar moth on it. This suits how I profile myself.” (Sophie)<sup>6</sup>. Another respondent mentioned that while at the moment they have not made any decorative changes for OnlyFans, this might change in the future: “If I start earning more money from it [OnlyFans] then I likely will invest a bit more. But for now it's fine.” (Lynn). In these cases, their public persona is influencing their private space.

In some cases, creators can make temporary changes to their backgrounds. For example, during the interview, Hannah showed some fake flowers she was working on:

“I try to make sets and stuff like that. I've been making little paper flowers to make a background of some sort. So I was thinking I could even put them like on my wall. (...). I try to make things, I don't know. Make it fun. But sometimes I don't change it. Sometimes I literally will just do nothing if I feel lazy. Maybe throw a nicer blanket down.” – Hannah

In addition to the interviews, some respondents also showed pictures of a place they had made content before. The backgrounds had very little information on *who* the creator was, no more than a decorative picture or poster here and there.

### Different boundaries

Whereas earlier in this chapter it was mentioned that answers might differ per person, there appear to be three different types of online content creators: boundary enforcers, boundary crossers and boundary improvisors. Where the first group, the boundary enforcers, set very clear boundaries for themselves in both space making and their persona, boundary crossers might not feel the need to keep a boundary between public and private. The third group,

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<sup>6</sup> This quote was originally in Dutch. See *appendix 2* for the original quote and translation.



boundary improvisors, might not have a clear set of boundaries, but just decide things as they go.

The groups can be recognized within the different topics. For example, the chapter started with showing the differences in personal social media use. The boundary enforcer has separate accounts and does not share their personal account with subscribers or post work content on their personal account. The boundary crosser does not feel the need to separate the two and have one intertwined account. The boundary improvisor might not have a clear distinction, or sometimes use their personal account for work purposes, but does not necessarily intertwine the two.

The table below shows the common characteristics of each category:

**Table 1.** *Boundary categorizations*

	Persona		Space-making
	Physical persona	Emotional persona	
Boundary enforcers	Change of appearance - Make-up - Hair/wigs - Outfits	Not sharing personal stories Use of pseudonym ‘Little white lies’	Renting spaces Designated creation-area No personal belongings in frame
Boundary improvisors	/	/	/
Boundary crossers	Little to no changes	True to private self Sharing personal stories No pseudonym	Little to no changes in backgrounds

## 5. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to give more insights in ways that NSFW content creators practice a distinction between public and private. Due to relatively new platforms such as OnlyFans, people can create (NSFW) content from within private places, to then share on the internet. While there is literature on sex work, online platforms, space-making and persona, these concepts are seldom combined. By interviewing NSFW content creators, an overview was created of how they practice a distinction between public and private (through persona and space-making), while using online platforms like OnlyFans.

Literature shows how the public/private distinction in sex work (or just sex in general) has always been a topic of discussion (Warner, 2002). As Berlant & Werner (1998) mention: intimacy has become linked to the personal life; thus, it is deemed as private rather than public. Now, the emergence of online platforms where creators can sell NSFW content, has only added more complexity. Supposed private acts are made public through NSFW content creation, which is (most often) done within private spaces. This results in a blurry distinction, which the creators have to deal with. The exact strategies to navigate the public and the private in one's work can differ. As the distinction has both embodied and spatial components, creators can opt for enacting a persona (either physical and/or emotional) and focus on space-making. These practices, especially persona creation, have mostly been researched in the context of for example Twitch-streamers. When creating a persona, authenticity is important: people want to enact a persona, without their subscribers noticing that it is not their true, private self (Giles, 2020; Jackson, 2020; Cardoso & Scarcelli, 2021). This leaves a fine line between being authentic and sharing too much private information.

This study shows that there are different ways to practice a distinction between public and private; namely persona creation (both physical and emotional) and space-making. With physical persona, they can change their appearance as if getting into a costume before

starring in a play. This helps create a physical boundary, which can influence the emotional persona as well: due to the interactive nature of online content creation, it comes with a lot of emotional labor. Unlike literature would make you believe, most creators make very little changes in appearance when it comes to enacting a persona. Most of it comes down to the emotional persona and space-making; not being completely honest with subscribers to maintain privacy and keeping personal belongings such as pictures out of frame (to name only an example).

It appears that there are three different categories when it comes to the creators: boundary enforcers, boundary improvisors and boundary crossers. Not only do these categories show how the respondents create a distinction and hereby add to persona and space-making literature, but it can also help other content creators decide how they want to separate public from private.

### Limitations and recommendations for further research

Of course, this research has its limitations. Firstly, due to the limited wordcount of this thesis, many things have been left unsaid. I strongly recommend further research on this topic to look more into the relationship between collaborating creators to investigate the emotional labor that is paired with the relationship between collaborating creators, and into the role objectification/dehumanization plays in persona creation. These topics were mentioned during the interviews but have not been analyzed in depth. Secondly, as it was very hard to find respondents, it is unclear if the sample is representative for the online (NSFW) creation community. A lack of diversity can mean that only a small part of the community is represented, which causes a non-generalizable conclusion. A third limitation, related to this issue, is that there was a very low response rate: reaching hundreds of creators (over the

course of several months) resulted in only ten interviews. For further research, it is recommended to be more immersed in the community.

Another limitation due to my position as an outsider of the community, is that the concepts researched are more focused on existing literature than on practical relevance for content creators. As some of them mentioned during the interviews, it is a very individual job, which doesn't necessarily require communication with others in the field. While to some this might be nice, others might want to have more connections with other creators. This leaves them to question certain practical things in the distinction between public and private, which did not come up in literature. For example, marketing your persona seemed to be a struggle. Among creators, there is a need for advice. Some respondents mentioned already having business meetings with other creators, to discuss their work together. This goes to show how important it is to give more insight into this work and leads to my main recommendation for further research: ask the community what they want to know, and include them from the beginning stages of the research.

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# Appendix

## Appendix 1: Topic list

Topic	Possible questions
Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Introduce self and note practical issues (privacy, recording, etc.)</li><li>- Ask respondent to introduce self</li><li>- Ask if respondent has any questions beforehand</li></ul>
OnlyFans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- How long have you been on OnlyFans?</li><li>- Do you use any other platforms to sell explicit content?</li><li>- What made you choose OnlyFans over other platforms or other forms of sex work?</li><li>- What does your typical workday look like? (e.g. what hours)</li></ul>
Physical appearance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- What changes do you make to your appearance before shooting? (hair, make-up)</li><li>- How much time do you spend getting ready?</li><li>- How do you decide to make certain changes to your appearance?</li></ul>
Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- What changes do you make to your environment before shooting?</li><li>- What is okay to be seen on camera, and what is not? (pictures, indicators of a partner, etc.)/Camera placement</li><li>- How do you decide what you don't want on camera?</li><li>- Where do you shoot your content?/Where do you work?</li></ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- What decisions did you make when decorating the room where you shoot?</li></ul>
Personality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Does the way you interact with customers differ than how you would behave otherwise?</li><li>- What do you do when you are uncomfortable working?</li><li>- How do you mentally prepare yourself before work?</li></ul>
Closing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Thank respondent and once again mention anonymity and privacy</li><li>- Ask if respondent has any questions</li></ul>

## Appendix 2: Translated quotes

<i>Original quote in Dutch</i>	<i>English translation</i>
<p>“Dat is eigenlijk een beetje begonnen als grap. Twee jaar geleden was dat een hype en mijn beste vriend zei van ja dan moet jij gaan doen.”</p>	<p>“It actually started as a bit of a joke. Two years ago, it [OnlyFans] was a hype and my best friend told me I should do it.”</p>
<p>“En sommige mensen vinden het dan een uitdaging om die te gaan vinden op social media ofzo. (...) vandaar dat ik daar niet meer actief op ben eigenlijk op LinkedIn, want uh. Ze gaan je daar zoeken en ze gaan kijken wie jouw werkgever is.”</p>	<p>“Some people see it as a challenge to go and find them on social media or something. (...), which is why I am no longer active on LinkedIn, because they go looking for you and who your employer is.”</p>
<p>“Een locatie is waar je niet gestoord wordt door random mensen. Dus in echt in het openbaar is ook nooit echt een goede optie. (...). Ik vind consent heel belangrijk, dus ik ga niet zomaar mensen shockeren met een fetish ding als ze daar niet mee ingestemd hebben.”</p>	<p>“A location where you won’t be interrupted by strangers. So, in public isn’t really a good option. (...). I think consent is very important, so I don’t want to shock anyone with a fetish-thing when they haven’t agreed to that.”</p>
<p>“Ik heb wel vrij veel decoraties, want ik heb wat kleine lampjes enzo hangen en ja wat decoratie, een leuke wandeling met met een met 1 grote luna moth erop (...) dat past heel erg bij hoe ik mezelf profileer.”</p>	<p>“I have quite a lot of decorations, because I have some small lamps hanging, and a tapestry with a big lunar moth on it. This suits how I profile myself.”</p>

“Dat is natuurlijk ook een heel stuk  
dehumanisering van sekswerkers en het idee  
dat dat je alles mag, zolang je maar betaalt.”

“It’s a dehumanization of sex workers, and  
the idea that you can do anything if you pay  
for it.”

## Appendix 3: Privacy and ethics checklist

### CHECKLIST ETHICAL AND PRIVACY ASPECTS OF RESEARCH

#### INSTRUCTION

This checklist should be completed for every research study that is conducted at the Department of Public Administration and Sociology (DPAS). This checklist should be completed *before* commencing with data collection or approaching participants. Students can complete this checklist with help of their supervisor.

This checklist is a mandatory part of the empirical master's thesis and has to be uploaded along with the research proposal.

The guideline for ethical aspects of research of the Dutch Sociological Association (NSV) can be found on their website ([http://www.nsv-sociologie.nl/?page\\_id=17](http://www.nsv-sociologie.nl/?page_id=17)). If you have doubts about ethical or privacy aspects of your research study, discuss and resolve the matter with your EUR supervisor. If needed and if advised to do so by your supervisor, you can also consult Dr. Bonnie French, coordinator of the Sociology Master's Thesis program.

#### PART I: GENERAL INFORMATION

Project title: How do NSFW content creators on OnlyFans practice a distinction between private and public?

Name, email of student: Tessa van Woensel, 505966tw@student.eur.nl

Name, email of supervisor: Irene van Oorschot, vanoorschot@essb.eur.nl

Start date and duration: 23 january 2023 – 25 june 2023

Is the research study conducted within DPAS **YES** - ~~NO~~

If 'NO': at or for what institute or organization will the study be conducted?  
(e.g. internship organization)

## PART II: HUMAN SUBJECTS

1. Does your research involve human participants. **YES** - ~~NO~~

*If 'NO': skip to part V.*

If 'YES': does the study involve medical or physical research? ~~YES~~ - **NO**

Research that falls under the Medical Research Involving Human Subjects Act ([WMO](#)) must first be submitted to [an accredited medical research ethics committee](#) or the Central Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects ([CCMO](#)).

2. Does your research involve field observations without manipulations that will not involve identification of participants. ~~YES~~ - **NO**

*If 'YES': skip to part IV.*

3. Research involving completely anonymous data files (secondary data that has been anonymized by someone else). ~~YES~~ - **NO**

*If 'YES': skip to part IV.*



### PART III: PARTICIPANTS

1. Will information about the nature of the study and about what participants can expect during the study be withheld from them? ~~YES~~ - **NO**
2. Will any of the participants not be asked for verbal or written 'informed consent,' whereby they agree to participate in the study? ~~YES~~ - **NO**
3. Will information about the possibility to discontinue the participation at any time be withheld from participants? ~~YES~~ - **NO**
4. Will the study involve actively deceiving the participants? ~~YES~~ - **NO**

*Note: almost all research studies involve some kind of deception of participants. Try to think about what types of deception are ethical or non-ethical (e.g. purpose of the study is not told, coercion is exerted on participants, giving participants the feeling that they harm other people by making certain decisions, etc.).*

Does the study involve the risk of causing psychological stress or negative emotions beyond those normally encountered by participants? ~~YES~~ - **NO**

Will information be collected about special categories of data, as defined by the GDPR (e.g. racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, trade union membership, genetic data, biometric data for the purpose of uniquely identifying a person, data concerning mental or physical health, data concerning a person's sex life or sexual orientation)? **YES** - ~~NO~~

Will the study involve the participation of minors (<18 years old) or other groups that cannot give consent? ~~YES~~ - **NO**

Is the health and/or safety of participants at risk during the study? ~~YES~~ - **NO**

Can participants be identified by the study results or can the confidentiality of the participants' identity not be ensured? ~~YES~~ - **NO**

Are there any other possible ethical issues with regard to this study? ~~YES~~ - **NO**

If you have answered 'YES' to any of the previous questions, please indicate below why this issue is unavoidable in this study.

I have answered 'YES' to question six "Will information be collected about special categories of data, as defined by the GDPR?" My answer is because 'data concerning a person's sex life' is something that might come up during my interviews. While I will not explicitly ask participants about their (personal) sex life, due to their work (sex work) and my topic (the distinction between public and private) it is possible that respondents will mention it. However, this will not be taken into account for my data analysis.

NOTE: I do not see their work as their sex life.

What safeguards are taken to relieve possible adverse consequences of these issues (e.g., informing participants about the study afterwards, extra safety regulations, etc.).

All participants are informed about the interviews through an informed consent form and some information will be repeated during the interviews, such as the fact that participants are free to withdraw from the research at any point.

Any information that can be linked to the participant (such as names) will be anonymized.

Are there any unintended circumstances in the study that can cause harm or have negative (emotional) consequences to the participants? Indicate what possible circumstances this could be.

It is always possible for vulnerable information to come up during the interviews. To prevent this, the interviewer will stay on topic and try to steer the participant back to the topic of the research. If any unethical information comes up during the interviews, this will not be transcribed.

*Please attach your informed consent form in Appendix I, if applicable.*

*Continue to part IV.*

## PART IV: SAMPLE

Where will you collect or obtain your data?

All data will be gathered through (online) interviews.

*Note: indicate for separate data sources.*

What is the (anticipated) size of your sample?

The anticipated sample size is 5-10.

*Note: indicate for separate data sources.*

What is the size of the population from which you will sample?

The population my research focuses on is all sex workers who sell content through OnlyFans. It is hard to tell the size of the population, as it is growing every day (and not all accounts are still active). In 2021, there were over 2 million content creators on the platform.<sup>7</sup> There is no concrete information on how many of these creators sell explicit content, which makes it impossible to state the exact population size.

*Note: indicate for separate data sources.*

*Continue to part V.*

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1334104/onlyfans-creators-worldwide/>

## Part V: Data storage and backup

Where and when will you store your data in the short term, after acquisition?

As all data will be digital files, it will all be stored on OneDrive, behind a password that only the researcher (Tessa van Woensel) has access to.

*Note: indicate for separate data sources, for instance for paper-and pencil test data, and for digital data files.*

Who is responsible for the immediate day-to-day management, storage and backup of the data arising from your research?

Tessa van Woensel

How (frequently) will you back-up your research data for short-term data security?

OneDrive serves as an automatic back-up system.

In case of collecting personal data how will you anonymize the data?

While transcribing, all personal data that can be linked to the participant will be left out and replaced (example: [name]) to guarantee anonymity for all participants.

*Note: It is advisable to keep directly identifying personal details separated from the rest of the data. Personal details are then replaced by a key/ code. Only the code is part of the database with data and the list of respondents/research subjects is kept separate.*

## PART VI: SIGNATURE

Please note that it is your responsibility to follow the ethical guidelines in the conduct of your study. This includes providing information to participants about the study and ensuring confidentiality in storage and use of personal data. Treat participants respectfully, be on time at appointments, call participants when they have signed up for your study and fulfil promises made to participants.

Furthermore, it is your responsibility that data are authentic, of high quality and properly stored. The principle is always that the supervisor (or strictly speaking the Erasmus University Rotterdam) remains owner of the data, and that the student should therefore hand over all data to the supervisor.

Hereby I declare that the study will be conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Department of Public Administration and Sociology at Erasmus University Rotterdam. I have answered the questions truthfully.

Name student: Tessa van Woensel

Name (EUR) supervisor:

Date: 26-03-2023

Date:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Tessa van Woensel', written in a cursive style.

## APPENDIX I: Informed Consent Form (English)

### Information form

#### Introduction

Under supervision of Irene van Oorschot, I (Tessa van Woensel) research how online sex workers practice a distinction between public and private. This research is conducted to complete the Sociology master Engaging Public Issues at Erasmus University Rotterdam. With the help of your participation, this research can be realized. I am curious about *your* opinion on this subject. There are no right or wrong answers.

For any questions you can use the following contact details:

- Mail: [505966tw@student.eur.nl](mailto:505966tw@student.eur.nl)
- Phone: +31 6 27541110

#### Data collection

To collect data, several interviews are conducted, which last approximately 30 minutes to one hour. These will be recorded and then transcribed. The recordings and transcripts will not be shared.

The interview will discuss your work as a sex worker. This means that topics like your sexual orientation and sex life may come up during the interview.

#### Potential inconveniences and risks

There are no physical, legal or economic risks associated with your participation in this study. You are not required to answer all questions. Your participation is voluntary and can be terminated at any time.

#### Vertrouwelijkheid en databescherming

The collected data will be used for data analysis and any confidential information or personal data will not be used in the results of the research. The audio recordings of the interviews will be deleted immediately after transcribing. These (anonymized) transcripts are stored in a secure location for two years.

#### The sharing of data

The data is only shared with the thesis supervisor (Irene van Oorschot) and if necessary with Erasmus University Rotterdam, for the purpose of researching and writing my master's thesis, which is mandatory for completing a study at the Erasmus School of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Erasmus University.

#### Voluntary participation and individual rights

Your participation is voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time. During your participation in the study, you have the right to request more information about the data collection and analysis. In addition, you have the right to withdraw your consent and request the deletion of your data before the dataset has been anonymized or the manuscript has been submitted for publication. You can achieve this by contacting Tessa van Woensel.

If you have any complaints regarding the processing of personal data in this study, please feel free to contact Tessa van Woensel. Questions can also be asked to the Erasmus University Rotterdam data protection officer via [privacy@eur.nl](mailto:privacy@eur.nl).

## Consent form

By signing this consent form, I confirm that:

- I have been informed about the purpose of the research, the data collection and the storage of data as described in the information form;
- I have read the information form, or it has been read to me;
- I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the research; the questions have been answered satisfactorily;
- I voluntarily consent to participate in this research;
- I understand that the information will be treated confidentially;
- I understand that I can discontinue participation or refuse to answer questions at any time without any consequences;
- I understand that I can withdraw my consent before the dataset has been submitted for approval.

	<b>Ja</b>	<b>Nee</b>
I give permission to record audio of the interview		
I give permission to record video of the interview		
I give permission to use quotes from my interview		
I give permission to use my name in the quotes		

Name of the participant of the research: \_\_\_\_\_

Date:

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX II: Informed Consent Form (Nederlands)

### Informatieformulier

#### Introductie

Onder begeleiding van Irene van Oorschot onderzoek ik, Tessa van Woensel, hoe online sekswerkers onderscheid maken tussen publiek en privé. Dit onderzoek wordt uitgevoerd ter afronding van de Sociologie master Engaging Public Issues aan de Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam. Met behulp van uw deelname kan dit onderzoek worden gerealiseerd. Ik ben benieuwd naar *uw mening* over dit onderwerp. Er zijn geen goede of foute antwoorden.

Voor eventuele vragen kan u gebruik maken van de volgende contactgegevens:

- Mail: [505966tw@student.eur.nl](mailto:505966tw@student.eur.nl)
- Telefoon: +31 6 27541110

#### Dataverzameling

Om data te verzamelen worden verschillende interviews uitgevoerd, welke ongeveer een half uur tot een uur duren. Deze zullen opgenomen worden en vervolgens getranscribeerd. De opnames en transcripten zullen niet worden gedeeld. Het interview zal ingaan op uw werkzaamheden als sekswerker. Dit houdt in dat zaken als uw seksuele geaardheid en seksleven naar boven kunnen komen tijdens het interview.

#### Potentiële ongemakken en risico's

Er zijn geen fysieke, rechtelijke of economische risico's verbonden aan uw deelname in dit onderzoek. U bent niet verplicht om alle vragen te beantwoorden. Uw deelname is vrijwillig en kan op ieder moment beëindigd worden.

#### Vertrouwelijkheid en databescherming

De verzamelde data zal worden gebruikt voor een data-analyse en vertrouwelijke informatie of persoonlijke gegevens zullen niet worden gebruikt in de uitkomsten van het onderzoek. De geluidsopnames van de interviews zullen direct na het transcriberen worden verwijderd. Deze (geanonimiseerde) transcripten worden opgeslagen op een beveiligde locatie voor twee jaar.

#### Het delen van data

De data wordt alleen gedeeld met de scriptiebegeleider (Irene van Oorschot) en indien nodig met Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam, met als reden het onderzoeken en schrijven van mijn masterscriptie, wat verplicht is voor het voltooien van een studie aan de Erasmus School of Social and Behavioural Sciences, Erasmus Universiteit.

#### Vrijwillige deelname en individuele rechten

Uw deelname is vrijwillig en het is mogelijk om op ieder moment te stoppen. Tijdens uw deelname aan het onderzoek heeft u het recht om meer informatie over de dataverzameling en analyse te vragen. Daarnaast heeft u het recht om uw toestemming in te trekken en te vragen naar verwijdering van uw data voordat de dataset is geanonimiseerd of het manuscript is ingeleverd om gepubliceerd te worden. U kunt dit bewerkstelligen door contact op te nemen met Tessa van Woensel.

Mocht u klachten hebben aangaande het verwerken van persoonlijke gegevens in dit onderzoek, neem dan gerust contact op met Tessa van Woensel. Ook kunnen vragen gesteld worden aan de EUR data protection officer via [privacy@eur.nl](mailto:privacy@eur.nl).



## Toestemmingsformulier

Door het tekenen van dit toestemmingsformulier bevestig ik dat:

- Ik geïnformeerd ben over het doel van het onderzoek, de dataverzameling en het opslaan van data zoals beschreven in het informatieformulier;
- Ik het informatieformulier heb gelezen, of dat het aan me is voorgelezen;
- Ik mogelijkheden heb gehad om vragen te stellen over het onderzoek; de vragen zijn voldoende beantwoord;
- Ik vrijwillig toestemming geef tot deelname aan dit onderzoek;
- Ik begrijp dat er vertrouwelijk wordt omgegaan met de informatie;
- Ik begrijp dat ik de deelname op ieder moment kan beëindigen of het beantwoorden van vragen kan weigeren zonder enige consequenties;
- Ik begrijp dat ik mijn toestemming kan intrekken voor de dataset is ingeleverd voor goedkeuring.

	<b>Ja</b>	<b>Nee</b>
Ik geef toestemming om audio van het interview op te nemen		
Ik geef toestemming om video van het interview op te nemen		
Ik geef toestemming om citaten van mijn interview te gebruiken		
Ik geef toestemming om mijn naam te gebruiken bij de citaten		

Naam van de deelnemer aan het onderzoek:

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Datum:

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Handtekening:

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