# Digital Labour and Platform Capitalism:

# A Discourse Analysis of OnlyFans Creators Interviews

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## ABSTRACT

Since the COVID-19 pandemic spread in 2020, platforms like OnlyFans have experienced a significant surge in popularity, also due to the fact that many people could not perform their in-person labour. OnlyFans revolutionised digital sex work by offering creators new modes of income generation through paywalled content. Many creators have begun to define this platform as a tool that empowers them and helps them achieve success and financial stability. However, there is academic evidence that, by operating in the realm of platform capitalism, digital workers on these platforms are often exploited in various ways. In addition, the exploitation of digital labour on OnlyFans is also a feminist issue, as the vast majority of workers identify as women, and the buyers are mostly heterosexual men. Therefore, there is a need to study the discourse around female labour on OnlyFans through the lens of three main theories: Platform capitalism, Digital Labour Theory and Feminist Theory. Throughout the research, it becomes clear that the findings reveal a discursive tension. On the one hand, creators often describe their work with words such as “empowering” and “freeing,” and they feel like they can “be their own bosses.” On the other hand, many also speak about the extreme competition on the platform, the lack of labour protections (e.g., sick leave and retirement) and the social and economic stigma they face because of their job. The methodology applied is Critical Discourse Analysis: by analysing the discursive choices of the creators themselves when discussing their labour, the aim is to investigate how OnlyFans workers create discourses around gendered experiences of precarity, empowerment, and oppression. This research aims to analyse how OnlyFans creators discuss their work and how they perceive labour precarity. This thesis contributes to the ongoing conversations about digital labour, focusing specifically on digital sex work.



KEYWORDS: *Platform Capitalism, OnlyFans, Digital Labour, Feminism,*

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# Chapter One: Introduction

## 1.1 Research Context: Platform Capitalism and Digital Labour

With the development of media and platforms featuring paywalls to monetise content, many types of labour drastically changed. Scholars have noted how this change has led to massive economic benefits for specific platforms (e.g., Uber, Fiverr, TaskRabbit), while workers are subjected to precarious work conditions (Easterbrook-Smith, 2023, p. 255). These conversations contributed to the definition of "digital labour", a term used to describe any work activity that takes place in online spaces, often without being recognised or fairly compensated (Fuchs, 2018, p. 678). It is in this context that scholars have argued that users, while feeling empowered by digital tools, may in fact be participating in systems of exploitation, pointing out that "When using these tools, users often neglect (or are simply unaware of) the huge profits they are making for the company itself, largely from the free labor" (Lacey, 2014, p. 159). The effects of this technological labour revolution became especially evident after the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, when the governments precautions toward COVID-19 brought to the closure of many in-person businesses and forced workers to work online (Nagel, 2020, p. 2) in the best of the cases, while many people lost their jobs since many in-person options for various industries were shut down completely.

This massive societal change brought academics researching digital labour, media studies, and workers' rights to focus on the conditions of digital workers, realising that the contradictions and limitations they faced were unique in their kind. Neo-Marxists defined this as platform capitalism, i.e., the economic model in which digital platforms mediate labour, commodify creators' activities, and extract value from their work (Srnicek, 2017, p. 38). Scholars such as Gorissen (2024) point out how using definitions such as "gig-economy," "platform economy," and "precarious (digital) work" tends to be a conceptual flattering, and that "we need to recontextualize the disparate conceptualizations of gig-work and the platform economy historically, chronicle their hybridization, and examine their definitional ambiguity" (p. 309). van Doorn (2017) points out that platform capitalism legitimates companies to keep controlling the workers' incomes while handling all the critical decisions related to their labour, thus "institutionalizing the tenuous post-Fordist social contract that forces workers to shoulder the risks and responsibilities of social reproduction" (p. 902).

### 1.2 Research on digital labour tends to exclude sex workers

Among the industries that were the most impacted by both the pandemic and platform capitalism, the sex work industry is often an overlooked side of inquiry. There is the conception that (digital) sex work should not be deemed as "real" labour, but it is perceived as "an easy way out for those who lack ambition or drive" (Siegel et al, 2022, p. 2717). For some scholars, the erasure of digital sex work stems from the double cancellation that it lives, both from being digital labour and for being related to sexual services: "Digital sex work […] is doubly disadvantaged when it comes to receiving recognition as labour. This is because sex work falls precisely into the realm of digital labour that is perceived as too 'fun' to count as work" (Ruberg, 2016, p. 152). As Rand (2019) claims, "There has been an explosion of research into diverse forms of digital labour, but this body of work is yet to connect this dynamic area of labour organisation with sexual labour" (p. 41). This might be due to the historical, social and economic stigmatisation that this industry is still facing. As Benoit et al. (2018) explain, stigmatisation toward sex work builds up on different levels, "from the macro level (law and policy and media), the meso level (justice system and healthcare system), and the micro level (the public and sex workers' own internalising of stigma)" (p. 460). West (2024) blames the "algorithmic gaze", claiming that "it further contributes to marginalisation" (p. 716) and that "Social media and fintech platforms mark sex as deviant, isolating and endangering workers" (p. 716).

Despite this, multiple people who were not sex workers prior to the spread of the pandemic started to rely on websites to produce and sell adult content due to unexpected financial issues (Cardoso et al.,2022, p. 169). Due to the lack of attention to this significant segment of digital workers, there is a need in Media studies to focus on digital sex workers as a case study, as the number of people (mainly women content creators) entering this industry is drastically increasing.

### 1.3 Societal relevance of OnlyFans in the public discourse

Digital sex work has become more relevant than ever within contemporary media culture, as there is plenty of sexual content which keeps getting produced and sold through these platforms. For this reason, from the perspective of Media Studies, the topic is gaining significant focus, and there is an increasing amount of academic research on it. OnlyFans is unarguably the most popular platform for digital sex work, to the point that "having an OnlyFans account" has become synonymous with publishing sexual and/or nude content online. The online platform, created in 2016, allows creators to share content (including, but

not limited to, adult entertainment content) exclusively with their subscribers, who must subscribe to the channel to access it. In this way, adult content creators could monetise their work directly. For this reason, many adult content creators publicly started endorsing the platform, talking about how switching to this type of content was much more lucrative than shooting for mainstream pornography companies. The name of the platform rapidly became a new sensation on mainstream news as well. It caused a stir on numerous mainstream newspapers and news channel when the creator, who goes by the name Sophie Rain, declared to a podcast that she had earned more than USD 3 million in one day (Wilson, 2025, n.p.); or when another creator who goes by Bonnie Blue was banned the VISA to enter in Australia due to her aim to start recruiting freshly overage boys (whom she controversially called 'schoolies') to create content together (Sarkar, 2025, n.p.). Suddenly, the platform was mentioned everywhere, among detractors who criticised its moral implications and creators who described it as a tool to achieve fame, economic independence, sexual freedom, and empowerment.

Although the benefits of online sex work compared to in-person services (e.g., safety, flexibility and autonomy) have been discussed, it also became evident that this type of labour has led to new forms of control that might disadvantage workers (Vallas & Schor, 2020, p. 274). OnlyFans operates in the realm of platform capitalism, which "introduces unique challenges, novel instances of violence, and perpetuates existing forms of gender, class, age, ethnic divisions, and other forms of discrimination" (Pajnik & Kuhar, 2024, p. 14). It also became evident that in this new digital space, there is a notable lack of specific policies to protect creators' content ownership and confidentiality (Díaz, 2023, p. 322). Overall, the discourse around digital sex work articulates the tension between seeing it as freeing and empowering on one hand, and precarious and exploitative on the other hand.

### 1.4 Thesis Statement

This thesis aims to examine how OnlyFans creators (who identify as women) construct the discourse around their experience of digital sex work. The theoretical frameworks implied for this research engage with the methodology of critical discourse analysis, which means that the exact words implied by OnlyFans creators are analysed through the lens of specific theories (among these, in particular, platform capitalism, digital labour theory, and feminist digital labour theory) to understand how sex workers discursively construct their work experience. This research also aims to contribute to and expand the existing academic conversation about sex work and digital labour. The primary research goal is to examine how

the discourses of OnlyFans content creators hint at themes such as financial precarity, economic (in)stability, and perception of gender-related discrimination. It is also vital to analyse how platform capitalism (in this specific case, OnlyFans as a platform) influences the language the creators uses, and to see whether narratives around precarity are hidden, sugarcoated, or denied. Through the analysis of ten YouTube interviews and podcasts featuring popular OnlyFans creators, this thesis examines how female OnlyFans content creators employ language to align themselves with or against discourses of empowerment. This research aims to understand how discourse around digital sex work could expose structural contradictions (both explicitly and implicitly) that are often overlooked in both academic and public discourse. Thus, this thesis is based on the following research question: How do gendered experiences of precarity appear in the discourse of OnlyFans creators within platform capitalism?

### 1.5 Chapter Overview

This dissertation is organised into five different chapters. In Chapter Two (Literature Review), I will introduce and review the existing academic research, primarily within broader areas of Media Studies, Gender Studies, Neo-Marxism, and Digital Labour Theory, explaining how these contributions informed my research and which research gap this thesis aims to address. The chapter also highlights the limited academic attention given to digital sex work, despite its increasing relevance in the platform economy.

Chapter Three (Methodology) outlines the methodological approach employed in this study, explaining the use of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the primary methodological framework. This method was chosen due to this research topic, which is highly focused on how language constructs meaning around power and identity. The dataset, which consists of ten YouTube interviews and podcast episodes featuring OnlyFans creators, will be explained in detail, including key research terms, viewer numbers, and other details that contributed to filtering the material for analysis. I will also briefly motivate the choice of using Atlas.ti for qualitative coding, and the concrete way in which this software helped in doing so. Reflections on ethical concerns, limitations of the dataset, and the researcher's interpretive role in qualitative analysis are also addressed.

Chapter Four (Results) presents the findings of the critical discourse analysis, which are organised around three dominant themes (platform capitalism, precarity of digital labour, gendered dynamics). First, it examines narratives of entrepreneurial empowerment, where creators often describe their work as a path to autonomy and financial stability. Second, it

considers experiences related to the platform itself, such as algorithms, visibility, and shifting monetisation policies, that directly affect their income. Third, it investigates how creators manage emotional labour, and the stigma associated with sex work, revealing the complex balancing act between personal expression and strategic self-presentation.

In Chapter Five (Conclusions), a clear and final answer to the main research question is provided, along with a discussion on how the findings contributed to achieving this aim. The chapter also outlines areas for future research, including comparisons with other types of platform labour, implications for digital labour policy, and a broader call for sex work to be taken seriously within media and labour studies.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

Since the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, the rise of paywall-based digital platforms such as OnlyFans has transformed the landscape of sex work, both in person and online. These platforms are often presented as able to guarantee a more flexible and independent line of work to adult content creators. However, plenty of research critiques the way in which platforms such as OnlyFans work, as they still operate within the exploitative logic of platform capitalism. This chapter introduces the theories that this research underpins and clarifies the conclusions reached on the topic: among these, the work of scholars who covered themes such as platform capitalism, digital labour theory, and feminist digital labour analysis is the backbone of this research. There is plenty of literature around digital sex work and the complexity of this topic, discussing contrasting discourses of autonomy and exploitation, visibility and marginalisation, empowerment and disposability.

### 2.1.1 Platform Capitalism

To fully understand platform capitalism, it is important to date its origins and historical development. As Vallas (2018) explains, the loosening of bank regulations during the 1990s brought companies to shift their focus from owning physical factories to controlling goods and services (Vallas, 2018, p. 52). This new approach to managing resources and venues emerged during the era of technological expansion, leading to the growth of many businesses online and laying the groundwork for the development of what is now commonly referred to as “platform capitalism”. Nick Srnicek coined this term in his homonymous work *Platform Capitalism* (2017), defining the economic model where digital platforms mediate labour, commodify creators' activities, and extract value from their work (p. 38). According to Liang et al. (2022), platform capitalism misleadingly sells a utopic reality where “platforms seem to

have become the promoters of the digital revolution, through which people can escape from government supervision and realise market populism" (p. 322). What platform capitalism aims to sell is a more democratic space that is supposed to contrast with the exploitative system of the real world (Rhodes & Pullen, 2010, p. 2). While some scholars have argued that the absence of managers benefits workers, it has been shown that the algorithm-based system of these platforms makes labour conditions even more precarious (Vallas, 2018, p. 54).

Another theme that scholars have discussed is how platform capitalism tries to mask itself and its purposes through the "progressive language" employed by the platforms and their proponents. Zaucha (2024) claims that platform capitalism appeals to consumers through "hyperbolic and utopian language" (p. 144). Although this model raises some arguments that its financial innovations contribute to a "democratizing effect" (Zaucha, 2024, p. 144), Neo-Marxist scholars started criticising how this language obscures capitalist structures and predatory practices.

### 2.1.2 Neo-Marxist critique of platform capitalism

The concerns about how computerisation and technology could impact workers date much before the invention of platforms such as OnlyFans. Gorz (1982) was already speaking of a "post-industrial neo-proletariat" (p. 69) at the very rise of technology, implying that automation and computerisation would have affected workers. Platform capitalism works in that "online platforms are available to front-end users but are controlled by centralised back-end server infrastructures, managed hierarchically by decisions made in Silicon Valley and executed by black-box algorithms" (Scholz, 2016, p. 26). There is also a shared agreement among Neo-Marxist scholars in finding platform capitalism as an exploitative system which gets rid of the most basic work rights:

> In the name of entrepreneurship, labour flexibility, individual autonomy, and freedom of choice, platform capitalism shifts the burdens of risk (unemployment, illness, old age) onto the workers' shoulders. It offers no minimum wage, no security, no health insurance, no pension, no unemployment insurance, no paid vacation, and no paid sick days" (Papadimitropoulos, 2021, p. 251).

Neo-Marxist scholars unanimously agree that platform capitalism creates a situation of "precarity" for digital workers. The term 'precarity' in this research refers to the exploitation of digital workers through the creation of contexts and rules where the products of their labour do not directly benefit them but rather are used and managed by external platforms.

### 2.2.1 Digital Labour Theory

Labour has evolved with the rise of technology: nowadays, more than 40% of people have access to an internet connection, compared to barely 15% ten years ago (Graham et al, 2017, p. 137). With the rise of new jobs related to the digital world, the need for new frameworks to analyse it became evident. Stemming from this need, digital labour theory became fundamental when analysing the dynamics of exploitation within paywall platforms. According to Gandini (2021), digital labour theory is an umbrella term used to describe different practices related to digital platforms and the way they monetise (p. 370). However, due to the rapid digital transformation, the definition of digital labour cannot be monolithic. Overall, the term "digital labour" refers to work performed online (Goel et al., 2024, p. 968). Digital labour theory is based on a (neo)Marxist perspective: as Pfeiffer (2014) explains, digital labour theory builds on Marx's work on labour theory by applying it to the digital context, describing how, through this system, the worker's labour is exploited (p. 600). Hence, in this new digital context, the notion of "immaterial labour" (or what is perceived as such) in contrast with "concrete labour" is a key point of the contemporary re-interpretation of the original Marxist theory (Pfeiffer, 2014, p. 608). Labour performed online is often sold to consumers as "not real", making it easier for big platforms to deny accountability for unfair treatment of their workers.

The patterns of exploitation happening to digital labourers often mimic the one that have been historically inflicted to all workers: As Zaucha (2024) explains, many people doing digital work often come from countries which has historically been economically exploited (especially during colonial times) and because their local currencies are weaker than the ones in the Western world, being paid through, for example, cryptocurrencies, seem like a good way to earn an income (p. 148). One of the darkest sides of digital labour is the relocation of work to countries with a much lower cost of labour and where there are fewer standards to guarantee (Ilsøe and Larsen, 2023, p. 9).

### 2.2.2 Notions of Unpaid Labour

The theme of unpaid labour in platform capitalism is central in this research. Ritzer & Jurgenson (2010) explain that digital labour theory comes from a Marxist analysis of online labour, which appears to support "a trend toward unpaid rather than paid labor and toward offering products at no cost, and the system is marked by a new abundance where scarcity once predominated " (p. 14). Bucher and Fieseler (2017) argue that one of the main risks of digital labour is the outside perception that it is not a "real job" due to its resemblance to

leisure activities and its connection to the entertainment industry (p. 1869). They quote Scholz's statement on digital labour, which, in his opinion, dangerously "does not feel, look, or smell like labour at all" (p. 1869). Digital labour theory as a framework is preoccupied with examining the exploitation of different kinds of digital workers (including, but not limited to, content creators). Scholars have researched the topic of unpaid digital labour before: Irani (2015) reports that workers of the crowdsourcing marketplace Amazon Mechanical Turk have been denied payment by their employers due to their work being deemed as "inadequate" by the platform (p. 228). As Howson et al. (2022) claim, these injustices are not accidental, but part of a system to extract value within platform capitalism. This aligns with the Marxist perspective, which sees surplus value (and thus profit) arising from unpaid labour (p. 735).

The notion of unpaid labour is deeply related to gender discrimination as well. Feminist labour scholars of digital labour argued that most of the unpaid digital labour is performed by women, and that there is a long tradition of depreciation of female labour, generally speaking, and digital labour falls under the same category (Duffy, 2016, p. 444). This becomes especially relevant when the digital labour performed is sex work. Creating digital (sexual) content feels too "frivolous" to be considered as a "real" form of labour (Berg, 2021, p. 27), becoming particularly liable to exploitation.

### 2.2.3 Identity Work and Social Media Repression

As previous research has shown, OnlyFans does not contribute meaningfully in helping the creators promote themselves. OnlyFans lacks internal discoverability, as "creators work cross-platform to drive fans to their accounts. These platforms may remove, block or restrict the content they share, shadowban their accounts, or deplatform creators, even if the platform's terms of service are not violated" (Soneji et al., 2024, p. 6). This means that "the infrastructure of OnlyFans can only support creators who can leverage a pre-existing audience and influence, as this study demonstrates how many creators have found different strategies to promote themselves and build their audience from the ground up" (Bonifacio et al., 2025, p. 17). In attempting to establish a brand on sites like OnlyFans, creators must engage in gendered and invisible forms of emotional labour, such as affective conversations and personal messaging (Rouse and Salter, 2021, p. 12). While these interactions help creators establish their brand, making their target audience "loyal" to them, "it may also add invisible labour for creators, especially those who feel uncomfortable self-disclosing personal information or constantly engaging with fans" (Hair, 2021, p. 209). Therefore, plenty of

research has established how identity work and self-branding constitute a huge part of the dynamics that platform capitalism normalises.

### 2.2.4 History and Development of Sex Work as a Form of Digital Labour

Digital sex workers fall under the umbrella of workers are heavily affected by platform capitalism. With the rise of globalisation and its consequent technologization, a plethora of in-person services have been transferred and adapted to the digital landscape. The sex industry is no exception to the rule, and the invention and diffusion of the Internet have had a substantial impact on how different sex workers advertise their services (Ray, 2007, p. 46). The history of digital sex work is intertwined with the rise of the internet and social media as a whole, which is something that many digital sex workers reclaim when faced with stigma and discrimination: “Though they were some of the first to use the internet commercially, legislation against sex workers continues to push them further into the margins. Women in the adult industry pioneered the early internet and made it profitable, until eventually, it screwed them over” (Barrett-Ibarria, 2018, n.p.). One of the main reasons why much sex work moved to the Internet was the spreading of severe so-called “anti-pimping” laws in California in the 1980s, where many types of in-person sexual services became illegal both to purchase and to give. Sex workers started then to create online pages where they could advertise their services more safely, without fearing imprisonment of economic punishments (Barrett-Ibarria, 2018, n.p.).

The digitalization of sex work has changed the industry in a profound and impactful way. Many workers have find an opportunity in the development of online sex work: for adult actresses, it has been an opportunity to create their personal brand and not limit their income to mainstream porn companies; in-person sex workers (e.g., escorts) have also pointed out the fact that online sex work has reduced risk related to their safety, being able to share resources with other online sex workers and denouncing possible violent clients (Pajnika and Kuhar, 2024, p. 3). It is important to specify that the creation of a digital landscape did not only make sex workers “move” to the internet, but it has also created new types of erotic services (and ways to advertise them), such as webcamming, instant message services with clients and content creation (photos and videos) that clients then pay to download (Sanders et al, 2017, p. 29).

With the spreading of adult services and entertainment online, multiple platforms (among these, OnlyFans in particular) started allowing explicit content. However, the reaction of different ASWs (adult service websites) has also shown an ambivalent relationship of

dependence between these platforms and its workers. Many of them, during the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK, which brought to much economic difficulties for multiple people, declared that they did not feel any responsibility for the economic conditions of the workers and, as Brouwers and Herrmann (2020) point out, “This imbalance in perceptions of responsibility and dependence is mirrored in the relations between workers and non sex work platforms, where the rights of the workers on the platform are negotiated in court, in unions, and through direct action” (p. 12). Kadıoğlu and Alparslan (2025) claim that OnlyFans creates a sense of insecurity among adult workers by disassociating their brand from pornographic content, while also not putting much effort into protecting the creators who drive the platform's financial success (p. 13).

### 2.3.1 Feminist Digital Labour Analysis

Considering this research topic, it is fundamental to apply digital labour from a feminist perspective, and it is fundamental to underline that feminist and digital labour theories have many points of intersection. Many of these forms of exploitation primarily target women workers, as the vast majority of adult content creators identify as females or adopt female-passing personas for their jobs, while the majority of buyers of this content identify as heterosexual, white males (Litam et al., 2022, p. 3093). With the term “feminist digital labour”, we intend to intersect labour theories with a specific gender perspective. There is a need for a specific term, as from a gendered angle, gig work often involves precarity for women. While the advent of platforms such as OnlyFans came with huge advantages, such as flexibility of schedule and intellectual ownership of the content, it also brought new forms of exploitation and censorship (Vallas & Schor, 2020, p. 283). Although the production and selling of adult content were not born on the previously mentioned platforms, the change from large companies to independent content creators has revealed a significant absence of clear policies and safeguards for their intellectual property rights (Diaz, 2023, p. 322).

Many scholars started pointing out the intersection of the exploitation of digital labour and gender discrimination. As Gregg and Andrijasevic (2019) underline, people who engage in digital work tend to be mostly women from unprivileged social and economic backgrounds, defining most digital work as “underpaid female and migrant labour” (p. 1). Curran-Troop (2023) discusses the contradictory conditions faced by sex workers on these platforms. Their reliance on digital platforms for income and the “hustle economy” (e.g., subscriptions, paywalls, tips) pushes competition and economic precarity (p. 375). In addition, adult platforms purposefully push the narrative of “oversupply” of creators, making them self-

conscious about the fact that they are replaceable: it became a "flooded labour pool, and intensified market competition for established webcam models whose income at least partly depends on this work" (Van Doorn & Velthuis, 2018, p. 178). Therefore, feminist bodywork is framed in a liberal and capitalist context (in this specific context, platform capitalism). According to Curran-Troop (2023), platform precarity should not be analysed as an isolated issue but as the predicted outcome of platform capitalism, which purposefully commodifies female labour (p. 384).

Easterbrook-Smith (2023) emphasises the intersection of gender oppression and the instability of gig economy dynamics and how this contributes to creators' precarity, specifying that "Given the disproportionate demographic make-up of online sex workers, this vulnerability which occurs at the nexus of precarity and stigma manifests in a way which is highly gendered" (p. 254). Among the examples of how the platform is unstable and not safe for sex workers, the author mentions the previous attempt of OnlyFans to ban adult explicit content (Easterbrook-Smith, 2023, p. 253).

### 2.3.2 Feminist Marxism and 'Digital Housewives'

The theme of gender-related digital exploitation of labour is still understudied. As Rand (2019) claims, sex work "is traditionally excluded from official labour statistics and mainstream labour politics because of the embedded sociolegal, cultural and political context that defines female sexual labour as illegitimate work" (p. 41). Most of the literature on digital work that statistically involves drastically more women cover topics such as fashion, beauty and parenting but has yet to include sex work (Rand, 2019, p. 41). Marxist feminists already discussed how patriarchy exploits female labour in capitalism and with new digital spaces bringing to different types of labour, they started wondering how this could impact workers from a gender-oppression perspective:

> Given that in the world of digital capitalism new unpaid forms of labour, such as the use of Facebook or crowdsourced labour, have emerged, the question arises: What can we learn from studies of the relationship of exploitation and oppression that helps us to better understand unpaid digital labour? (Fuchs, 2018, p. 678).

Following this logic, in her book *Feminism, Labour and Digital Media. The Digital Housewife* (2015) Kylie Jerret defines women working on digital spaces as "the digital housewife" (p. 3). Verma (2018) explains Jerret's work, arguing that according to the author, digital female labour is underpaid because "it does not directly serve the interest of a capitalist

economy" (p. 278). Therefore, feminist scholars stated that "in the same way in which housewives have been denied protection and remuneration for their labor, the platform's measures to ensure safety and economic stability for those who create the most economic value on these platforms – female digital laborers – seem to be insufficient" (Kadıoğlu and Alparslan, 2025, p. 13). Palatchie et al. (2025) examine the economic insecurity online sex workers face within platform capitalism, pointing out that algorithm-driven systems force workers to perform unpaid labour (p. 2). They also move a critique toward the neoliberal ideology, which conceals the oppressive systems that damage workers' lives and is at the core of normalising such exploitation (Palatchie et al., 2025, p. 4).

Many workers also pointed out the difficulty in monetising from the platform directly, and that "reaching wider audiences for free seems to be not so much a result of the platforms' algorithm, but more a result of solidarity among content creators themselves" (Kadıoğlu & Alparslan, 2025, p. 8). As Gorissen (2024) mentions, "privatized platform companies' continued control and normative influences over the contemporary gig-economy facilitate asymmetries of information and power, and the labor dimensions of digital platform-based sex work on workers' and employers' outcomes should not be dismissed" (p. 323). Therefore, there is much female labour behind unpaid content and social media repression, resulting in unpaid or unfairly paid work.

### 2.4 Research gap

While many scholars have discussed concepts such as platform capitalism, gig work, and the gender dimension of digital labour exploitation in detail, a gap remains in the research. Firstly, while there is plenty of research on digital labour, focusing mainly on different types of influencers, the academic focus on OnlyFans creators and digital sex workers is limited. This might be due to the stigma that sex workers still face in society, and the relatively recent skyrocketing of OnlyFans in mainstream media. As Gorissen (2024) mentions, "privatized platform companies' continued control and normative influences over the contemporary gig-economy facilitate asymmetries of information and power, and the labor dimensions of digital platform-based sex work on workers' and employers' outcomes should not be dismissed" (p. 323). It is essential to examine the effects of similar types of labour on this particular online community, as they are subjected to various intersections of exploitation. There is a need for research that examines closely how platforms themselves contribute to the exploitation of creators' labour through their policies (e.g., posting, editing, self-promotion, and attempts to negotiate with the platforms).

In addition, although the existing literature discusses how platform dynamics (such as content moderation, censorship, and policy changes) impact online workers' income, it tends not to approach the topic from a feminist and neo-Marxist perspective. While plenty of research proves that sex workers promoting themselves on social media also must avoid specific language, under the constant threat of being censored and shadow-banned (Eichert, 2019, p. 230), this issue goes further than limiting freedom of speech. Webber et al. (2025) remind us that similar restrictions make online sex workers' incomes less stable (e.g., forcing them to lower their prices) while endangering them by making it more complex to apply safety measures to check their clients' background (p. 6). Neo-Marxist theory must be used as a theoretical framework to analyse how the precarity of the platforms which host sex digital labour impacts the livelihood of the workers, who risk finding themselves without a source of income and no worker protections; feminist theory comes into play in analysing how most of this exploitation concerns female labour.

This research integrates these theoretical frameworks with the methodology of critical discourse analysis, focusing on the discourses created by the OnlyFans creators as they narrate their experiences and position themselves within capitalist logics. Existing studies often discuss online sex work as either merely an economic activity or a form of personal expression. Still, they rarely connect it to broader systems of power and inequality. A feminist and neo-Marxist approach helps reveal the intersections between gender, labour, and capitalism within digital sex work, shedding light on the structural conditions and power relations that produce them.

## Chapter Three: Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodology used to conduct this research, the process by which I collected the data, and the steps I took to ensure the highest level of reliability and validity. The aim of this chapter is to provide a detailed explanation of the methodology chosen, which was selected based on the nature of the subject, the objectives of this research, and the theoretical framework from which the research stems. This chapter outlines the data collection process, the rationale for selecting specific sources, and the tools used for analysis. It also provides a detailed coding framework, explaining how themes and patterns were identified, categorised, and interpreted. This includes outlining the specific steps I used to code the interview transcripts systematically, using qualitative data analysis software to ensure structure, consistency, and transparency in the analytical process.

### 3.1 Choice of the Method

This research implies qualitative methods, with critical discourse analysis as its primary methodology, to explore how OnlyFans creators articulate their experiences within the broader context of platform capitalism and digital labour. The choice of using qualitative methods stems from the nature of the subject being studied in this research. While quantitative research is based on numerical data and statistical analysis, doing qualitative research is a better choice when the aim is to examine human behaviours, as it allows researchers to analyse subjective experiences (Lim, 2024, p. 1). As Brennen (2013) argues, “qualitative researchers ask research questions, search for meaning, look for useful ways to talk about experiences within a specific historical, cultural, economic and/or political context, and consider the research process within the relevant social practices” (p. 15). Therefore, considering that this thesis encompasses societal topics such as sex work, the advent of technology, and labour, qualitative methods are more suitable. In particular, for the theoretical framework that I have decided to apply in this research, critical discourse analysis is the best fit. Van Dijk (2003), one of the most influential scholars in this field, defines critical discourse analysis as the study of “the discursive reproduction of dominance (power abuse) and its consequences on social inequality” (p. 87). He builds on Michel Foucault's theories by focusing on “general social strategies of dominance and knowledge management at the more detailed level of cognitive knowledge structures and strategies and how these affect discourse structures” (Van Dijk, 2003, p. 88). Wodak (1995) defines the purpose of critical discourse analysis as to analyse “opaque as well as transparent relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language" (p. 204). This study aims to uncover the latent meanings behind the words implied in these interviews and relate them to broader theories. The discourses to be analysed relate to digital labour and its precarity, the capitalist dynamics that platforms apply to content creators, gendered discrimination, the discourse of “empowerment” and “agency”, and how they manifest themselves through the use of specific language.

Using Onlyfans creators as a case study relates to a significant research trend: how people, especially women from marginalised groups, express their experiences related to new forms of digital labour. Focusing on how creators discuss their labour on such websites, this study contributes to past research on digital labour and gender exploitation, highlighting how these issues are often intertwined. Precarity and exploitation within digital labour are analysed from different angles, such as demonetisation, social media censorship, or algorithmic

platform control. Overall, critical discourse analysis “studies real, and often extended, instances of social interaction which take (partially) linguistic form. The critical approach is distinctive in its view of (a) the relationship between language and society, and (b) the relationship between analysis and the practices analysed” (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000, p. 448). Implying it as a method makes it possible to find latent meanings from the testimony of online sex workers, e.g., the tension between empowerment and oppression, or strategies that are used in online discourses to underline the struggles of digital labour and to glamorise online sex work (Cardoso et al., 2022, p. 181). According to Fairclough (2013), critical discourse analysis “brings the critical tradition of social analysis into language studies and contributes to critical social analysis a particular focus on discourse and relations between discourse and other social elements (power relations, ideologies, institutions, social identities, and so forth)” (p. 9).

In addition, focusing on YouTube videos as a social practice helps to examine how OnlyFans content creators construct discourse around their identity and profession, and critical discourse analysis allows us to study how people present themselves and build discourses online (Riboni, 2020, p. 56). Considering that a huge focus is on the word choice of the creators (e.g., whether there are recurring words that they use to describe specific phenomena), the choice of critical discourse analysis becomes evident.

### 3.2 Description of the Sample and Sampling Method

The dataset consists of publicly available online content collected from YouTube interviews and podcasts featuring OnlyFans content creators discussing their experiences. The sample consists of ten YouTube videos, each lasting between 30 minutes and 1 hour. The number of videos has been chosen to ensure a significant sample, thereby excluding coincidences in the possible repetitions of patterns and word use. However, a larger number would have led to data saturation. The transcripts of the videos are attached in the appendix of the thesis and analysed in detail in Chapter 4 (Analysis and Results). The videos have been transcribed manually, without the use of AI tools, to avoid sharing the data of the creators to third parties without their consent. The words were reported verbatim.

The data selection process relies on purposive criterion sampling, as it helps select cases that are relevant to the research question and align with the study's goal (Campbell et al., 2020, p. 653). The choice to use YouTube videos for the dataset is based on several reasons. Firstly, the scope of discourse analysis is not only to analyse the words used by the creators, but also to analyse the fact that those specific words are used on platforms from

which they can direct traffic to their OnlyFans profile. While on YouTube, creators share their stories and perspectives, as Tolson (2010) claims, "the performance of 'any imagined 'authentic self' is inevitably compromised by its marketisation" (p. 286). Critical discourse analysis not only analyses language but also considers the context in which this language is used. The platform also provides a paratextual dimension to the discourse (e.g., body language, tone of voice), which can enhance the analysis and enables researchers to explore how creators "position themselves and their persona with respect to the wider orders of discourses" (Riboni, 2020, pp. 56–57). Therefore, YouTube videos offer plenty of content to study the creators' identity construction and how it interplays with specific social discourses (in this case, digital labour, sex work and gender discrimination). The content included in the sample is selected based on specific criteria. The first one is the level of engagement. The most popular videos and podcasts on the topic are more likely to have a higher degree of public reach; therefore, I have only analysed videos with at least around a million views. Similarly, the number of followers that the creators themselves have on social media is crucial, and this selection was brought to only analysing videos of OnlyFans models with at least 50,000 followers. This choice was made because the purpose of this research is to analyse both how creators are influenced and influence these discourses simultaneously. Second, the gender identity of the creators is a core factor in the selection process. This study focuses exclusively on creators who do not identify as men, centring on the experiences of individuals whose labour is often impacted by particular forms of precarity and stigma. I have analysed only videos where women and non-binary people share their experiences with the platform. Third, the selected content must represent OnlyFans content creators directly, rather than external individuals discussing the issue, ensuring that the narratives are relevant to the core theme of the research. Finally, only content published after the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 was included, as this period saw a significant surge in the platform's visibility (reaching 75% of increase in March and April 2020), mainly due to "the massive unemployment and displacement of face-to-face sex industry workers" (Litam et al., 2020, p. 3094).

While sampling the data, the decision was made to collect videos from various sources. Some come from industry insiders, who will likely be more biased towards describing OnlyFans (e.g., Holly Randall Unfiltered) in a positive light. Others will come from a more neutral, journalistic tone (e.g., White Soft Underbelly, BBC). The creators are all women and non-binary people, aged 21 to 30. The content is all in English, as the United Kingdom and the USA are currently the largest markets for OnlyFans (Statista, 2024).

### 3.3 Steps of Critical Discourse Analysis

Gölbaşı (2017) summarises Fairclough's three-step conduct critical discourse analysis, claiming that "it consists of textual analysis, the production, consumption and distribution of the text called interaction, and the interpretation of the text in its social context which is called the contextual analysis" (p. 9). As Miceli and Posada (2022) explain, this methodology facilitates “identifying recurring patterns and recurring themes and sub-themes” (p. 8) in the texts.

In the first step, I have selected the videos to analyse through specific keywords in the titles. The search on YouTube included terms such as "OnlyFans top creators," "OnlyFans creator experience," and "What is it like to be an OnlyFans creator?".

In the following step, I have analysed the language used in the analysed data (including their word choices) when discussing economic precarity and gender discrimination. To complete this step, I have transcribed the content (verbatim) of each YouTube video and then uploaded the documents to Atlas.ti In the final part of the analysis, I have grouped specific quotations from the text that convey similar meanings, or “codes”. The findings are linked to a more extensive theoretical discussion about platform capitalism, precarity and feminism. This is because to conduct critical discourse analysis, it is crucial not only to analyse the word choice, but also to connect it to a broader context.

### 3.4 Operationalisation and Procedure on Atlas.ti

The main concepts to operationalise in this research are digital labour precarity, gendered patterns of exploitation, and platform capitalism. These themes are identified through discursive cues such as metaphors, recurring lexical choices, and narratives of resilience or instability. To analyse these abstract concepts, they have been systematically coded within Atlas.ti for detailed thematic mapping and analytical interpretation. As Paulus & Lester (2016) explain, “Atlas.ti enables the analyst to engage, through queries and networks, in deeper levels of analysis than is possible by hand” (p. 424). The software helps create categories based on recurring words used in the analysed pieces of content to create subcategories of how certain words convey specific meanings. Atlas.ti allows the analysis of the video transcripts (which will be transcribed and uploaded as text files), using nodes to categorise discourse patterns.

To analyse the transcriptions of the interviews, I created three discourse groups which aim to investigate different aspects. This procedure can be defined as “coding” and according to Boyatzis (1998), “Codes identify a feature of the data (semantic content or latent) that

appears interesting to the analyst, and refer to 'the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way" (p. 63). Here are presented the codes that have been applied to the transcripts and that form the Codebook and the Codetree of this research (See appendix A and B):

Platform capitalism: where the codes included are *being your own boss, branding, career switch, competition, entrepreneurship, financial discrimination, financial stability, freedom, independence* and *poverty*. Platform capitalism and its consequent precarity are analysed through digital labour theories, identifying forms of unpaid work and "immaterial labour". Therefore, "platform capitalism places the platform at the centre of critical understandings of digital economic circulation" (Langley & Leyson, 2017, p. 13), forcing exploitative labour conditions and affecting content creators' financial security and visibility. Platform capitalism is operationalised through the participants' references to the structure and payment logic of the platforms, such as the taxation system, content moderation, and monetisation policies of Onlyfans. Recurring narratives of dependency on the platform and its economic models serve as indicators of exploitation. A significant aspect of what needs to be operationalised in the realm of platform capitalism is the concept of identity work. A significant part of this research aimed to analyse how the boundaries and labour of creators are challenged by platform dynamics (both on OnlyFans and on external platforms used to drive traffic to their profiles). A particular focus has been placed on how the creators present themselves as a brand or company, how they discuss the control they have over their content, and to what extent they are willing to compromise rigid boundaries and values for monetary reasons.

(Digital) labour precarity: where the codes included are *social media repression, social media labour, unpaid labour, hustling, identity work, lack of discoverability, platform(s) dependency* and *precarity*. Based on Gandini's (2021) definition of digital labour as a term used to describe different labour practices involving digital platforms (p. 370), the concept is operationalised through references, implicit and explicit, to financial (in)stability and unpredictability of income. This includes references to 'hustles', difficulty planning long-term, and references to unpaid or undervalued work. An assumption that needs to be made when operationalising labour precarity is that, according to a neo-Marxist perspective, the injustices, the unpaid labour often not even perceived as such and similar things are not accidental but an integral part of an exploitative system (Howson et al., 2022, p. 735).

Gendered dynamics: where the codes included are *emotional labour, empowerment,*

*feminism, sexual behaviour, societal stigma, agency/choice, boundary setting*. The object of this research is content creators who do not identify as men. With 'gendered patterns,' we refer to how precarity differently affects people with different gender identities (e.g., gender-based discrimination or expectations of varying treatment from audiences and hosting platforms). This relates to feminist digital labour analysis as a theoretical framework, which not only focuses on theories on the exploitation of digital workers but also intersects with gender-based discrimination. This research query explores the underlying concerns female content creators express about financial risk when discussing platform-based work. In addition, there is a need to operationalise the assumption that is often made that women who are content creators will engage in unpaid labour. Among the discourses related to feminism, the concept of agency and freedom in feminised (sexual) labour is a prominent one. While research has already proved that under the guise of independence, platform capitalism leaves workers to deal with the consequences of precarity (Papadimitropoulos, 2021, p. 251), this discourse has to be linked to a gender-specific, feminist lens of interpretation.

Once this subcategorisation was created and applied, it was possible to start visualising the findings and the patterns. First, all the transcripts were uploaded as Word documents on the platform. I have then highlighted specific words, phrases, or sentences that stood out or were repeated across different interviews, based on the codes presented previously. In conclusion, Atlas.ti is helpful for this research as it enables us to see patterns more clearly and compare how different creators discuss the same issues, making the analysis more structured and in-depth. In addition to textual coding, I have added notes to the transcripts that relate to visual and paralinguistic cues (e.g., body language, tone, pauses), as they contribute latent meaning to the multimodal dimensions of discourse, which is essential in YouTube interviews where presentation plays a rhetorical role.

### 3.5 Credibility, Reliability and Validity of the Research

Although reliability is considered a criterion of mainly quantitative research due to its more systematic nature, it can also be assured in qualitative research. Tracy (2010) defines eight fundamental criteria that assure the quality of qualitative research, namely "(a) worthy topic, (b) rich rigour, (c) sincerity, (d) credibility, (e) resonance, (f) significant contribution, (g) ethics, and (h) meaningful coherence" (p. 839). Credibility, in particular, is fundamental as the criteria guaranteeing that research is trustworthy, verisimilar, and plausible of the research findings (Tracy, 2010, p. 842). To ensure that the research is credible and valid, this research follows steps that include "thick description, triangulation or crystallization, and

multivocality" (Tracy, 2010, p 843). The analysis relies on previous research done by a multitude of scholars to confront how they described and applied critical discourse analysis.

Regarding the validity of this research, in qualitative analysis, nothing can be considered an objective truth, as it is not based on objective numerical tools and standards. However, there are strategies to ensure that a qualitative study is as valid as possible. Silverman (2011) suggests methods such as triangularisation ("comparing different kinds of data and different kinds of methods to see whether they corroborate one another") and respondent validation ("taking one's findings back to the subject being studied") (p. 369).

### 3.6: Positionality and Limitations

The first thing that I find fundamental to mention regarding my positionality is that my research scope does not stem from a position of hatred, disdain or judgment towards sex workers. On the contrary, this thesis aims to understand how the dynamics of platform capitalism exploit people who are often already considered at the "margins" of society, due to the stigma they face. It must be specified that I am not a sex worker and/or an online content creator; therefore, some shades of meaning might be difficult for me to fully understand as much as somebody who is an insider in these industries. As Reich (2021) explains, qualitative researchers reflect on how their background, identity, and experiences might shape the way they conduct research (p. 578). Thus, this research aims to avoid any form of paternalism.

Another limitation of this research lies in the methodology used. I did not conduct interviews directly with popular OnlyFans creators; however, I have used publicly available online material. This choice has been made because I was interested in seeing how creators might have used branding strategies when describing their experiences on the platform in places that could have helped expand their resonance and popularity (e.g., YouTube). While YouTube videos constitute a large part of discourse, they cannot capture private or anonymous experiences. These creators are aware of speaking to an audience, which may influence the way they present their experiences. What they share is shaped not only by their lived realities but also by platform logics and the need to maintain a marketable brand.

Another vital point to mention is that I have decided to include some of the transcribed interviews verbatim, although I found that they did not align with my set of moral values. This is because I believe critical discourse analysis is about analysing how speech is implied, and ragebait (the purposeful use of controversial language to drive more traffic to one's own digital work) is part of such analysis. I find using terms such as 'schoolies' to refer to (overage) young adults who participated in a particular type of content despicable for

normalising language that fetishises attraction toward youth. I also believe that none of these words were used without a specific aim (in this case, to upset people), and for research purposes, it was essential not to censor them.

Finally, there is a concrete limit to what this kind of study can explain. My research primarily focuses on language and how creators discuss their work. However, this does not always align with what they feel or experience in real life.

## Chapter Four: Results

In this chapter, the analysis of the transcripts is presented and linked to the theoretical perspectives detailed in Chapter 2 (Literature Review). The findings can be grouped into three areas: discourses on platform capitalism, digital labour precarity, and gender-specific dynamics.

### 4.1.1 Discourse on Platform Capitalism

### 4.1.2 Competition and hustling

It becomes immediately apparent that the theme of competition and extra-hard work is central to how creators present their labour. The platform features numerous creators, resulting in high competition (Van Doorn & Velthuis, 2018, p. 178). As the platform has seen a huge raise in popularity, the number of creators increased drastically, to the point that it becomes more difficult to stand out and become popular, as Bonnie Blue claims here:

> Bonnie Blue: You've got to be interesting, do you know what I mean? I mean, not no one wants a wanker with boring content. It's just finding a niche and understanding I guess the industry and, like, it is hard. Like, there's so many other girls I still work with an are friends with, and they're like, fuck, I just can't find a niche

The risk is being perceived as “boring” or “not finding a niche” due to the vast number of competitors (as mentioned, there are “so many girls”). In addition, the reliance creators have on using the same digital platforms for income, and the “hustle economy” pushes competition and economic precarity (Curran-Troop, 2023, p. 375). Like many gig workers, OnlyFans creators often live with the tension between having control over their income and experiencing instability. The theme of having full control over their income on OnlyFans comes out often in different interviews, as Kazumi claims here:

> Interviewer: OnlyFans makes it where the money goes into your pocket mostly
>
> Kazumi: Yeah, and I'm control of all of it

However, at the same time, the creators mention the fear of being replaceable and losing popularity, which makes them aware of the competition on this platform:

> Holly Randall: Financial independence is so important because, just as with any business, you never know, like one minute you're the favourite and then the next minute […] they don't like you anymore

The possibility of "not being liked anymore", i.e. being replaced by a newcomer in the industry, is not seen as an unfortunate hypothetical situation but as an existing threat to consider in your line of work. The creator here emphasises that it is like "with any business", diminishing the gravity of the need to continue hustling due to the fear of suddenly losing their popularity and, consequently, their source of income. However, using the expression "the next minute" hints at the instability of this industry. Creators are also aware that the amount of money you make is based on the amount of work you do:

> Naomi: The worst part [of this job] I think, because of my upbringing, I would say the uncertainty of the money, because it's not just a fixed salary of what like a doctor would have or a tech person would have, it's really like how much effort and energy you put into it is how much money you make so if you slack on one day like it reflects in your numbers that instability freaks me out.

The creator here associates the "amount of money" you make with the term "effort", normalising the concept that this type of work does not have a fixed salary (and drawing a comparison with jobs such as those of doctors and tech professionals). However, she seems to justify this fear with her "upbringing" (as she mentioned having grown up with economic uncertainties) rather than recognising it as a fault of the platform and of how it handles digital labour. On this matter, McMillan Cottom (2020) defines the rise of work on digital platforms and in the gig economy as "predatory inclusion", or the logic of alluring people in marginal situations (e.g., sex workers) to digital spaces with the promise of empowerment to exploit their labour then and keep them in conditions of economic instability (p. 443). This means that, on the one hand, these platforms appear as an easy way to earn money, thereby attracting many people, but on the other hand, the way these platforms are set up creates tough competition, bringing to the "devaluation of labour – particularly for those who do not conform to dominant societal norms" (Qoza, 2025, p. 6). Another proof of the extreme competition that there is in the industry comes from an interview with the creator Kazumi,

who claims that once successful, OnlyFans creators tend to hold an elitist position towards other sex workers:

> Kazumi: I feel like when a lot of sex workers become hyper successful, they forget what it's like being the small guy, you know, being a full service sex worker, being a street worker, someone who doesn't have as much resources

From the interviews, it appears that the creators balance out the stigma and instability that come from being digital sex workers with overworking and competing, with the aim of maintaining their popularity, justifying these sides of the industry. Another recurring word used to describe this type of labour is “hustling” or “being a hustler”. While this word originally comes with a negative meaning (i.e., somebody who is prone to do anything, including illicit business to make money), the term here becomes glamourised and used as a synonym of hard worker:

> Alix Lynx: But you're right, you have to be a hustler, but you should be a hustler if you're gonna get into this business, I think it's crucial
>
> Holly Randall: Yeah, if you're gonna expose yourself to the stigma that the adult industry is inevitably gonna rain down on you, you better be prepared

The choice to use and repeat the term “hustler” stems from the desire to soften the difficult material circumstances of this job, such as working overtime to survive extreme competition. Stardust et al. (2023) define “gig” or “hustle” economy in sex work as “characterised by temporary, freelance, and casualised work, as well as heavily policed” (p. 70). This term seems to be glorified in these interviews to the point that some creators use those words to self-define. A creator describes Jenna Jameson, arguably one of the most popular porn stars of all times, as a hustler, and then defines herself as such as well, pointing out that this is the reason why her OnlyFans career is so proficuous:

> Alix Lynx**:** Jenna Jameson was in there [documentary about pornography], they're showing like her heyday, like well, how she made like all this money, and she was like a hustler, and like I've always been that way, so I was like yeah, I can definitely crush it

This word choice highlights the glamourisation of working overtime, a typical feature of people in digital labour and the gig economy. Duffy and Hund (2015) discuss how digital workers create a notion of work that “does not seem like work”, as work and fun are mixed together to cover the dark sides of this type of labour (p. 9). Behind the self-definition of

"hustler", the creators try to hide issues such as overworking and extreme competition, and rather than perceiving it as a systematic problem inside their industry, they glorify the effort of those who manage to be popular by overworking themselves:

> Bryce Addams: Even when we take like vacations, you know, we tend to have like a chill time, but we'll bring four or five people with us that are close friends, and like we'll, you know, do fun events that are, you know, good for content

Here, the creator mentions "making content" (which means working) during holidays, sounding like a leisure activity in one's free time. The boundaries between vacations and "chill time" are blurred here, suggesting that some linguistic choices ("friends", "chill time", "content" instead of "work") are used to soften the reality of not being able to take complete time off in this industry. This discourse reflects what Warren (2021) argues, which is that gig work contributes into "problematically further blurring the boundaries between paid work and non-work, causing "intense spill-over from work to nonwork" (p. 531). For the creators, "hustling", competing and overworking becomes a lifestyle which allows them to remain popular. While they seem to be aware of these dynamics, there is a pattern of justification, or they tend to minimise the issue overall.

### 4.1.3 Hyperbolic Language: Being "Entrepreneurs" and "Your Own Boss"

The hyperbolic language around certain dynamics also comes across. As Zaucha (2024) explains, platform capitalism often employs euphemistic language to conceal the systemic discrimination and injustice it creates and justifies (p. 141). It appears that much of this type of language is internalised by the creators too. Platform capitalism often endorses the "independence" discourse. Vallas (2018) claims that platform capitalism usually uses the "existence of a powerful rhetoric of freedom and independence" (p. 56) as a counterargument when the theme of exploitation is raised. Liang et al. (2022) define it as "populism", hinting at its deceptive nature (p. 322). The word "freedom is often used by the creators:

> Holly Randall: Obviously, working in adult has given you independence, being a content creator has given you independence, and not like, I mean to work a nine-to-five soul-crushing job has given you some freedom

The "independence" of this line of work is compared to a "soul-crushing" 9-5 job, which does not allow you to be independent. However, the themes of "freedom" and "independence" often oppose the lack of protection that these types of platforms give you. The creator

“Indianamylf” explains how it is fundamental to do investments and savings in independent accounts to assure a future once leaving the industry:

> Interviewer: when you first started making that kind of money or did you start blowing it like what 99% of people would do?
>
> Indianamylf: So it's easy to say, I can buy this and that when I'm making this much, but I'm fairly smart ,even though I bought my brand new house in cash, I bought my brand new cars in cash, I still made sure that my investments were taken care of and their [children] college funds were taken care of stuff like that. But I don't know if we're not on vacation, I don't spend money, so we're at home living in a house that's paid for, pay for groceries, gas, and I save.

Like most digital workers, the type of jobs that OnlyFans creators do is solely based on their performance. For this reason, it offers no security (e.g., minimum wage, health insurance, pension, unemployment insurance, paid vacation, or paid sick days) (Papadimitropoulos, 2021, p. 251). Safaee (2021) explains that the absolute freedom and flexibility of gig economy workers are myths, claiming that “Rather than having one boss, gig economy workers have a rotating list of employers whose happiness with their work determines whether they will be able to get more jobs because of the rating system” (p. 16).

Among the recurring expressions related to an entrepreneurial sense of self, there is the concept of “being your own boss”.

> Holly Randall: Hello, everybody, welcome back to another quarantine version of Holly Randall unfiltered. Today, I have the model/entrepreneur / her own boss bitch Alix Lynx!

Scholars have identified this attempt to sugarcoat the difficulties behind euphemisms that refer to defining themselves as “entrepreneurs”. “Although the squeezed and uncertain graduate labour market is (occasionally) acknowledged, notions of ‘freedom’ are discursively constructed through invocations to be your own boss” (Allen and Finn, 2024, p. 342). Thus, on OnlyFans, “precarity is repackaged as a welcome opportunity to develop resilience and entrepreneurialism” (Allen and Finn, 2024, p. 342). The creator Sarah Juree, who used to be a teacher on minimum-wage pay, mentions that being an “entrepreneur” helped her breaking the precarity cycle she used to live in:

> Sarah Juree: As an entrepreneur, I was like I could really get out of this poverty cycle, I could pay my car off and uh credit card bills, maybe take my kids on a vacation, and so it sort of got my wheels turning about exploring this opportunity.

The difficulties of having to deal with constant hustle and having no labour rights are disguised under the claim of "girlbossing". The term "entrepreneur" is used with similar aims as well. As Allen and Finn (2024) note, there is a "girl bossing" focus on being entrepreneurial, which hides the fact that many women (including highly educated ones) still face unfair treatment and challenging conditions. Oftentimes, the words "entrepreneur" and "own boss" hide dynamics such as overworking and burnout.

### 4.2.1 Discourse on (digital) labour precarity

### 4.2.2 Justifications of Unpaid Labour

The second group of findings relates to the discussion and perception of precarity of digital labour. Most of the creators explicitly mention how much of their work goes much beyond the creation of adult content, requiring much time-consuming effort:

> Indianamylf: I shoot for seven days a week, but if it's not seven days, it is five, so like weekends, if we have a birthday party or um we go camping here and there, I'll only do five days a week […]
>
> Interviewer: And when you're not shooting, you're probably posting and editing and things like that?
>
> Indianamylf:: Yeah, it is an all-day thing. I get up at 6 AM, go to the gym for two hours, get home, and then I'm constantly posting until my kids are home from school
>
> Interviewer: So you run it like a professional […], if you were a lawyer or a doctor or a nurse, you'd be working just as much

From how creators speak, it seems that it is taken for granted that a lot of unpaid labour is required to run a successful OnlyFans account (e.g., editing, posting on social media, replying to comments and direct messages). Working on weekends, apart from special occasions, is described as the norm. The creator, through specific word choices such as "always", "all-day", and "constantly" or through comparing themselves with jobs that are overall considered as demanding (*lawyer, nurse, doctor*), wants to put emphasis on how difficult and time-demanding this job is. This is probably because people outside of the

industry assume that OnlyFans is “easy” work (the host himself tells the creator “like a professional”, implicitly assuming that digital content creators are not like other professionals). It seems that OnlyFans content creators’ work is underestimated due to two reasons, which are being digital labour and being related to sexual services: “Digital sex work […] is doubly disadvantaged when it comes to receiving recognition as labour. This is because sex work falls precisely into the realm of digital labour that is perceived as too ‘fun’ to count as work” (Ruberg, 2016, p. 152).

> Indianamylf: They think that I took the easy way [to make money], it's what they think
>
> Interviewer: I've talked to a lot of girls that are in your situation, they all work as hard as I do, and I'm working seven days a week
>
> Indianamylf: Yeah, it's all day

The expression “all day” work is also used by the creator Naomi in a different interview:

> Naomi: OnlyFans is a full-time job so I'm working all day every day on my OnlyFans and on my social media in general

While the host wants to show sympathy to the category, using expressions such as “as hard as I do (work)” makes a comparison between “real” and “unreal” jobs, proving that the notion of underpaid labour is something that can somehow be justified, especially if the kind of labour is as stigmatised as sex work is. Often, the creators themselves internalise this idea, and, as Bucher and Fieseler (2017) discuss, many digital workers fail to perceive their labour as such because of its similarity to leisure activities (p. 1869). This can be seen by the fact that most of the time, when mentioning that it is a demanding job, creators feel the need to justify the critique, adding that “they love what they do” and that “they don’t want to suggest that they don’t like it”:

> Alix Lynx: I mean like, no I wouldn't do it if I didn't love it obviously
>
> Holly Randall: Yeah well, I mean I don't want to suggest that people don't love performing, but I don't want people to think that, you know I want, I guess I what I want is people to understand that it is hard work

Another reason why it is easy to justify and accept that OnlyFans creators do much unpaid labour stems from the nature of the job itself. While digital labour theory has already proven how digital work is considered to be “intangible”, adding sex work to the equation

incentivises this idea. As Ruberg (2016) claims, digital sex work is considered “too fun to count as work” (p. 152).

### 4.2.2 Platform Dependency and Unemployability

Even among creators who speak about their job in a more optimistic manner, the contrast between pride in their work and the economic stability and wealth that this job has given them is often juxtaposed with the awareness of the negative aspects this job could bring. One of the creators openly admits that she has experienced financial discrimination due to her job, and that it is far from being uncommon (“everybody” does):

> Holly Randall: I feel like everybody in the adult industry has their, you know, financial discrimination story. In fact, the FSC just published data that two-thirds of sex workers have lost access to either a bank or financial service, while 40% have had an account closed within the past year.

Financial discrimination for sex workers, especially in the US, is common and leads to severe risks to their safety, security, livelihood, and health (Stardust et al, 2023, p. 62). From the interviews, it appears that this risk is well known among content creators, who consider it when choosing this line of work. They openly admit being against it, but somehow it is mentioned briefly and liquidated as a sort of “necessary evil”. As Stardust et al (2023) claim, financial discrimination against sex workers is not anomalous, but rather “the convergence of privatization, platform monopolies, and intermediary power with existing practices of stigma, discrimination, and exploitation” (p. 62). On a similar note, the creator “Indianamylf” mentions the absolute inability she would have in finding a regular job, as she lives in a small town where she is considered infamous:

> Indianamylf: Let's say I quit OnlyFans tomorrow, and I try getting a job in my hometown, it's absolutely not going to work.
>
> Interviewer: Once you make this decision, you're stuck with it
>
> Indianamylf: You're stuck, especially in a small town… Miami, you'll be all right, but small-town Indiana…
>
> Interviewer: Yeah, so do you regret it?

> Indianamylf: Absolutely not, nope, the goal was not to find another job at a corporate, the goal is to make all this money and not have to work ever again and I could stop tomorrow.

While she says she does not regret her choice, at the same time, the creator uses the words “stigma” and “stuck”. She explicitly mentions that entering this industry is a “scarlet letter”, and that once that specific type of content is spread online, there will be no possibility to truly maintain your privacy, and it will jeopardise your access to future careers. Although OnlyFans is supposedly a paywall platform, there are no real prevention tools (e.g., capturing screenshot systems) to avoid leaking personal content, and also the existing ones can be easily circumvented. She also mentions that she “could stop working tomorrow”, which suggests that the amount of wealth that this platform has given to her allows her not to be worried about future career options, but that if that was not the case, she would be, as she repeated multiple times, “kind of stuck”. This resonates with Pitcher’s (2018) research on the perception sex workers have around stigma, where many of them admitted that “their past as sex workers was haunting them their whole lives” for future employment possibilities (p. 146). The creator Lena the Plug mentions how the stigma of having done sex work will be likely to force you in staying in that career and turn you into unemployable:

> Lena the Plug: [If I made] a million dollars, but I spent it all on rent, in this great car, and I have nothing and it turns out I can't get another job, and I have to live on sex work till I’m 90 […]. As a woman specifically because the men can go on to other things more easily […]. Women in porn, save your money, you probably have to live on this money for the rest of your life.

According to Van Doorn (2017), the platform is aware of the stigma that creators live and takes advantage of this situation: “Platform labor remains thoroughly embedded in a world created by the capitalist value form, which hinges on the gendered […] subordination of low-income workers, the unemployed, and the unemployable” (p. 908). Most of the creators seem aware of the stigmatisation that this type of labour makes them live, and of the fact that it immediately impacts the ability to switch industries. Digital creators, especially those who make adult content, depend on specific platforms to monetize, while these platforms don’t have much reason to give better pay or support, as they are aware that the workers do not have many other options (Easterbrook-Smith, 2023, p. 263). OnlyFans has little competition so far: other patronage platforms heavily restrict adult content and do not

allow creators to post live action pornography (Bonifacio & Wohn, 2020, p. 3). The creator Lena the Plug mentions how, in case OnlyFans banned adult content as it almost happened in 2021 (Lorenz & Lukpat, 2021, n.p.) it would be a massive monetary loss, and that there are "no competitors":

> Lena the Plug: I mean, we saw the rug almost get pulled out, we know that OnlyFans has the network effect and yes, we could all pivot to another platform that will not have the network effect […], name three of its competitors, you want to go on there and make money? Yeah no. there's no value.

Therefore, having little to no competition, OnlyFans can maintain its conditions without the risk of losing creators.

### 4.2.3 Branding, Identity Work and Social Media Repression

Another aspect that comes from analysing these interviews is that the creators talk about themselves using the word "brand".

> Allie Eve Knox: I'm really thankful that way yeah [joining "Sex Factor"] kind of built my brand, at the time I remember I got a shit ton of followers, it was like it was pretty publicized and marketed

This "brand" is based on the type of look they present with (e.g., age, skin colour, hair colour, natural body or plastic surgery) and the performance they offer (e.g., "solo", "boy-girl", "girl-girl"). Creators must create different personas related to the type of look and experiences they aim to sell, which affects the way they self-promote their image on social media and the kind of audience they cater to (Bonifacio et al., 2025, p. 16). For the creators, more than being conventionally attractive, it seems to be important to put labour in creating an established brand that can be marketed toward a specific audience, as Naomi claims:

> Naomi: Everybody has their own market, like, some of some people I know that wouldn't be the way stereotypical like attractive, like make crazy money, it's really just… you have your own niche market.

The fact that creators use the word 'brand' to define themselves can already be seen as a problematic aspect of their dependency on these platforms: as Belk (2019) argues, treating the self as a brand leads to self-objectification, seeing oneself as an image or commodity to be consumed (p. 19). In addition, branding requires different types of effort: "The aesthetic labour invested in production, as well as the conceptualisation of one's products and services

in order for a coherent and niche portfolio to be created, are practices contributing to self-branding, a component of indirect internet-enabled sex work (Cardoso et al., 2022, p. 178). Thus, the amount of effort that the users put into branding and interacting with their fan base on these pornographic sites far exceeds what has been defined as “playbour” (Stahl & Zao, 2024, p. 2). The lack of internal discoverability forces creators to promote themselves on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat to drive traffic to their accounts. This is also enforced by the “lack of inner recommendation or matching mechanisms of traditional gig platforms” (Kadıoğlu & Alparslan, 2025, p. 4), therefore forcing creators to rely also on other platforms to draw customers:

> Holly Randall: Some people get on OnlyFans and they don't really make that much money, they don't have you know… again the lack of discoverability is like atrocious on there,
>
> Sarah Juree: Oh, it's so hard
>
> Holly Randall: If you don't have some kind of social media platform, something to get your name out there, is a possibility that you won't really make a lot of money

The contradiction stands in the fact that social media platforms are famous for having stringent policies around nudity and the promotion of sex work, at the point that “they may remove, block or restrict the content they share, shadowban their accounts, or deplatform creators, even if the platform’s terms of service are not violated” (Soneji et al., 2024, p. 6). As Blunt et al (2020) explain, account deletion, limitation, or shadowbanning are “an integral part of surveillance capitalism, where the user is still on the metadata collection and surveillance matrix” (p. 15). As the creator Allie Knox explains, the deletion of social media accounts is much more severe than losing a good marketing outlook: creators use their profiles to build communities

> Allie Knox: My Instagram… I'm on my third one I mean there's just everything it's just always a fucking battle, so not only is this money right, this is also our social art, our community, but like this is my business. Now I have to start over with that content, I have to start out with my community building.

The deletion of a social media profile results in the loss of the products of hard labour, and losing their online community exposes creators to situations of economic instability.

It is evident that on OnlyFans, the top creators were already popular on other platforms (some were popular because they worked in the mainstream pornography industry beforehand) before monetising this visibility through OnlyFans, and that therefore, a lot of identity work and branding work needs to happen outside of the platform, through social media, which oftentimes represses sex workers' content. Therefore, the instability of digital labour, brought by the difficulties in branding due to the stigma that sex workers face, and the policies of the platforms, contribute to the already unstable nature of gig-work.

### 4.3.1 Discourse on Gendered Dynamics

### 4.3.2 Feminine Emotional and Aspirational Labour

The final group of findings relates to gendered dynamics. Emotional labour, or the necessity always to maintain a positive attitude to keep customers comfortable and happy, is a huge unpaid and unspoken part of this type of labour. Allie Eve Knox, who does financial domination (a practice of owning and handling someone else's finances with their consent) on OnlyFans, explains that most of the job is building an emotional connection with fans:

> Allie Eve Knox: this is mostly about like a relationship management, this is about getting to know someone and taking over, and I think that Financial domination is taking over their money and their finances because that's what controls most of us

She also claims that people love OnlyFans in particular due to these dynamics:

> Alix Lynx: It's just the human one-on-one interaction, it's such a personalised experience for every single fan because I'm on there, dming my fans twice a day

Creators admit that to run a successful account, you need to "interact with" and "get to know" your followers constantly, as they are looking for somebody to "relate" to. The choice of these specific verbs, which are usually used in the context of friendship or relationship-building, makes it clear that the type of labour involved goes much beyond offering a sexual service.

> Naomi: I think that's the beauty of someone like me, versus someone with thousands and thousands and thousands of subscribers is like, I really do have more of the time to like interact and get to know them. So, just the ones that like I know what they do for a living they know where I came from… a lot of my Subs[cribers] actually like are in the tech world, so we have something in common that we can talk about, like how is your day, you know… and we do talk about it, and we have something to relate to

each other about. But I wouldn't say that's the case for everybody. A lot of people just subscribe and buy their videos and never want to talk to me

The creator also mentions “having more of the time to like interact and get to know them” as an advantage for her business, hinting at the fact most of the customers expect to be taken care of from an emotional side. As Cılızoğlu (2024) explains, “although they have not got any supervisor who should control and check customer satisfaction […] for increasing their subscribers, producing content is not enough but making them comfortable and happy is one side of their work” (p. 46). The creator Lily Philips, who shot a video with 100 men in one day, at the end of the interview, starts crying due to her worries about not having entertained them enough:

Interviewer: And that's what's making you feel emotional? That maybe you think you didn't give some guys a good enough time today?

Lily Philips: Yeah, and it's hard, I think having the interactions with them when they're like, what you're not going to make me finish, I've come all this way, like, kind of like guilt tripping me a little bit, I felt bad

Many times, their labour is compared to the “passion” that creators feel for their fans or for their job, which is meant to counterbalance the draining nature of this line of work. The creators mention openly “loving their job”, and that “it makes them happy”:

Kazumi: If I could do this all if my lifestyle didn't change, I would do this all for free […], this fulfils me and makes me happy.

Claiming that she “would do it for free”, Kazumi hints at the concept of “aspirational labour”. Duffy (2016) defines this concept, which is the key to achieving popularity in this industry: those who have the privilege of being able to perform work that is not immediately compensated (and that could be in the future) are performing aspirational labour (p. 449). Although Duffy (2016) defined mainly influencers in the world of beauty and fashion, as Van der Nagel (2021) claims, NSFW “content creation is arguably another feminised field in which aspirational labour takes place. The few content creators who achieve success in terms of making content creation their full-time occupation tend to enjoy a relatively privileged position” (p. 399). The creators themselves tend to justify the fact that, especially at the beginning, they need to perform a lot of labour which is not immediately paid:

> Bonnie Blue: And that was like coming out was fine, but it's like 12-hour days, which I was more than happy to, I've got good work ethic, but unless you're sat by the computer, you're not earning money

Here, working twelve hours a day in front of the computer is minimised with “having a good work ethic”. The concept of female unpaid labour does not come as news, and it comes from a documented history of exploitation. A clear example is housewives, who have consistently performed emotional unpaid labour (e.g., caring for children, cleaning, cooking) without receiving a universal income, as it has been deemed unimportant in the interest of a capitalist system (Verma, 2018, p. 278). Regarding the digital world, academia has drawn a parallelism to how digital female creators are not paid for much of their labour: “in the same way in which housewives have been denied protection and remuneration for their labor, the platform’s measures to ensure safety and economic stability for those who create the most economic value on these platforms (female digital laborers) seem to be insufficient” (Kadıoğlu & Alparslan, 2025, p. 13). Female unpaid labour comes up multiple times in the language used in these interviews, and its often masked behind concepts such as sacrifice and “passion”.

### 4.3.3 Empowerment vs. Oppression: Choice feminism

Some creators express their interest in conducting this line of work due to the desire to express their sexuality, openly mentioning that it was not out of poverty or illegal circumstances. They describe themselves as sexual beings who “enjoy sex” and are “exhibitionists”. They explicitly distance themselves from women who are in this industry out of desperation and use the word “troubled” to describe those types of people.

> Bonnie Blue: They was like, has someone asked you to go into this? Are you in trouble for money or something? Like, has something happened? It's like, no, you don't have to have troubled background or have some sort of issue to want to get into the sex industry.

> Holly Randall: You just have to be somebody who maybe enjoys sex and likes being an exhibitionist.

Bonnie Blue’s choice distancing herself from people who do sex work out of desperation hides a lack of sympathy towards women that are oppressed by this industry, which relates to “neoliberal feminist” views of female being “empowered” by making a lot of money. The debate on sex work has oftentimes been split in two radical categories, where

some scholars conceptualise it as “the commodification of women's bodies and emphasising how women are exploited and are in a victim position”, and others “as a type of work in that women can earn money and can be empowering” (Cılızoğlu, 2024, p. 40). Other creators come from an unprivileged background instead, and they express gratitude for having had the chance to secure a good amount of money and a better upbringing for their children:

> Indianamylf:  I grew up very, poor and wondering how I'm going to eat what I'm going to eat when am I going to get new school clothes and my kids don't have to do that and never will

Regardless from their economic background, the creators affirm to be in this line of work “by choice”. The concepts of agency and oppression intertwine in the discourse around this type of work. Most of the creators used the word “empowering” and/or “freeing to describe this type of work, focusing on the fact that it was completely out of their choice and they never felt forced to do anything. However, some peculiar cases of language use arise in certain interviews. It appears that making a good amount of money is difficult, if not impossible, without doing full nudity and/or pornographic content. A creator mentions that there is no chance of making money with SFW content because “that’s what the men want”, confirming to us the gendered dynamics of this platform: the clients are men, and they are deciding which type of content women are posting.

> Indianamylf: Yeah, [on her page], you can see everything
>
> Interviewer: I guess that's how you make money
>
> Indianamylf: Yep, I have. Yeah, I tried the no nudity page, but it won't work. You have to be all spread open
>
> Interviewer: That's what the men want

This part seems to contrast with one of the other features of the creators' discourses, which is “having strong boundaries” and “not being forced to do anything they do not want to do on the platform”, which strongly relates to a “choice feminism” vision of this business.

> Bryce Addams: your OnlyFans page is your world, you set your own boundaries, your rules, everything, and you're the one that can change them too

The word “extreme” juxtaposed with some of the experiences and choices that popular content creators have made to become popular on the platform also raises questions about

whether it is true that there is no need to push boundaries to monetise on the platform. In the interview/documentary about the British content creator Lily Philips, who had sex with 100 men in one day, the interviewer decides to ask another creator about it. Alex Le Tisser appears to be the lone voice and harshly criticises this choice:

> Alex Le Tisser: It's scary, yeah, because people are starting to do the most outrageous things online. I've seen so much of it lately and I think my daughter's already getting stick for what I do. And like I said, I don't really do anything controversial compared to all these other girls. And it just keeps being like levelled up and up and up of the expectations.

While it can be true that nobody forces creators to commit such "extreme" stunts, they unarguably set the standards for what type of content can be retrieved on the platform, and consequently, the competition among creators. In the same interview, the theme of setting boundaries and then crossing them comes up again:

> Lily Philips: I probably won't do it [talking about dangerous suffocating practises], I don't want to encourage it
>
> Interviewer: What if someone offered you a million dollars to do it?
>
> Lily Philips: [moment of silence] I probably would bend my morals for that

In addition, there are also monetary reasons that might push creators' boundaries. As van Der Nagel (2021) affirms, the creators are often pressured to push their personal boundaries for financial gain, while the platform mainly promotes its SFW (safe for work) content to attract a wider audience (p. 406). While the creators declare to be in this line of work by choice, the concept of "freedom" becomes complex, as it oftentimes is in platform capitalism. As Bleakley (2014) explains, for cyber sex workers, negotiation "is an essential aspect of the genre, with the sense that consumers have directed the actions of performers serving to increase investment in the sexual material that is ultimately produced" (p. 899). If the choice of not creating always more extreme content brings to the loss of popularity, loss of income, and with the inability of facing the extreme competition of these platforms, it is debatable how much of this choice has to do with freedom and agency, and how much the market regulations dictate it.

Most of the scholars define sex work on OnlyFans through a binary spectrum of judgment, deeming it either fully empowering or downright oppressive (Cılızoğlu, 2024, p.

51). From these interviews, it becomes clear that blindly following this black-or-white vision on sex work leads to a reductive vision of the issue. The absolute truth on the matter does not exist and cannot be summarised in one research. However, it becomes evident that the capitalistic structures are assimilated and projected in the linguistic choices of the creators. One of the arguments that is often brought up openly is the monetisation of something for which these creators were already really interested in, i.e. sexuality.

> Lily Philips: I started when I was at university, very tame stuff, bras, underwear, things like that, because I was at University, I was like, I'm being a slut anyway, I could make a little bit of money
>
> Interviewer: what do you mean by you were being a slut anyway?
>
> Lily Philips: like it was just being a university like I was just sleeping around with everyone
>
> Interviewer: But I feel like I know of a lot of girls who have done that at University but then haven't gone on to become OnlyFans stars
>
> Lily Philips**:** Yeah, 100% I mean, I just was like already very… not "proud", like, very just okay with doing that, like, I've just always had quite like a sexual nature, I just thought I might just make like, a couple hundred quid

"Sleeping around" and "having quite of a sexual nature" (i.e. having a sexuality which is perceived as promiscuous) is seen as a foundation value for becoming a digital sex worker. Berg (2017) reminds us that the discourse of OnlyFans as an empowerment tools tends to mirror "post-Fordist work ethics" (p. 670) and that it "calls for committed self-identification with work rather than duty-bound acquiescence to the fact of working to live" (p. 673), eliminating the line between leisure activities and labour. The fact that some creators feel the need to "justify" their work choice, mentioning that they were promiscuous in everyday life, and that monetising on that aspect seemed advantageous to them, can be perceived both as empowering and as oppressive.

Previous research suggests that "experiences of sex workers are multifaceted and that most sex workers report aspects of both oppression and empowerment" (Martins et al, 2024, p. 105), and that "patriarchal repression of female sexuality, rampant objectification, and financial hardship create opportunities for empowerment through reclamation and capitalization" (Martins et al, 2024, p. 107). However, empowerment is shaped in a specific

manner through the logics of neoliberal feminism, in which "workers are seen as self-sufficient entrepreneurs, where success is constructed to be dependent on effort and hustle, not structural factors" (Rand & Stegeman, 2023, p. 2104). The tension between empowerment and oppression, as discourses related to digital sex work, is evident in the interviews analysed in this research. To navigate this tension, it is necessary to explore various feminist theories and the historical context of this type of tension.

### 4.3.4 Feminist Discourses Around (Digital) Sex Work

The debate over the difference between "empowerment" and "liberation" is also not new to feminism. As Zhang (2024) argues, "In post-feminism discourse, the feminine ideal (being young, slim, attractive, and sexually desirable to men) is achieved through self-surveillance, monitoring, and discipline, arising from individual choice and responsibility for 'empowerment'" (n.p.). However, feminist scholars disputed that transforming your sexual desires into labour does not contribute to collective liberation. The Neo-Marxist feminist opposes the neoliberal vision on digital sex work, which promotes it as feminist liberation as they consciously decide to use their body to achieve financial freedom (Magallanes, 2025, p. 103). When feminism is mentioned explicitly in the interviews, it recalls these neoliberal values:

> Interviewer: Would you refer to yourself as a feminist?
>
> Lily Philips: yeah at the end of the day, doesn't feminist mean like you just want equal rights for boys and girls? And yeah I do what I want, and I do it because I enjoy it. I think there are obviously some women that maybe go into because they have to or need the money and stuff like that, or they're kind of coached into it by men, but my personal experience as only ever I've only ever felt empowered by the fact that I'm making money.

Through the assimilation of empowerment and happiness with "making money", and the diminishment of the experience of those who were forced into this type of job ("there are some, but I am making money in this industry, so it is ethical"), Lily Philips implicitly supports neoliberal values and "choice feminism". Another discussion around how pornography impacts feminism comes up again in the interview:

> Lily Philips: I'm like a part of the problem, it's so hard because like doing extreme stuff like this like this is not normal like and I think then guys are probably going to

expect girls to maybe be as slut as me and sleep with this many guys and take it up the or do stuff like that that isn't real life sex.

Defining herself as “part of the problem”; it becomes clear that the creator herself does not see what she is doing as something ethical, but that she can accept it because she can monetise it. Once again, the tension between empowerment (in this case, in the sense of sexual freedom and liberation) and oppression for women is perceivable. The case of Lily Philips also became a mediatic one, as at the end of the interview (after the stunt with 100 men), she started crying, bringing people to wonder whether she is truly feeling empowered by her choices.

While much of the third-wave feminism focuses on empowerment, many feminists challenge this discourse, pointing out that OnlyFans does not truly give power into the hands of female creators. On the topic, MacKinnon (2021) claims that “there is no way to know whether pimps and traffickers are recruiting the unwary or vulnerable or desperate or coercing them offscreen and confiscating or skimming the proceeds”, and “OnlyFans takes 20 percent of any pay, its pimp’s cut” (n.p.). Other feminists scholar tried to find a middle approach to the theme, through what they defined as “pragmatist feminism”, an approach which “seeks outcomes that give ACCs stronger bargaining power to ensure their legal rights and freedom are respected” (Bak & Nocella, 2023, p. 446) This theoretical ground believes that regardless from the moral discussions around pornography its illegality would harm creators and they should more have legal protection (Bak & Nocella, 2023, p. 446).

The debate over whether doing digital sex work can be considered an empowering, feminist act or an oppressive, patriarchal one has no objective resolution, and, as these interviews show, the answer could only be based on the everyday experiences of the workers. What can be stated on the matter, however, is that the discourse of agency in digital labour of any type, including sex digital work, is heavily influenced by a post-feminist neoliberal discourse. The contribution that this research aims to bring to the matter is to show how platform capitalism and neoliberal feminism, which “champions free choice and personal responsibility while overlooking structural injustices” (Zhang, 2024, n.p.), intertwine in the exploitation of digital sex workers, and that platforms such as OnlyFans take advantage of this intersection of exploitation.

## Chapter Five: Conclusion

In this chapter, the findings presented in Chapter Four will be summarised and integrated to provide a comprehensive and final response to the initial research question, explaining from which needs this research stemmed, and how they have been met. This chapter also includes a section where I present my personal reflection on my positionality and limitations as a researcher to the reader. Finally, I aim to conclude with a call for action and an invitation to pursue further research on the topic from different angles and perspectives.

### 5.1 Key Findings of this research

In this research, the aim was to reflect on how creators describe their experiences and perceptions of precarity while working within platform capitalism. Different steps have been taken in Chapter Four to reply to this question.

Firstly, the YouTube interview of the creators has been analysed to find implicit references to platform capitalism. Creators come from diverse economic backgrounds, but they all share a common desire to increase their income. They were all aware of the risk of societal stigmatisation, financial discrimination, and the difficulty of finding future employment. This issue is explicitly mentioned by most of them; however, they briefly touch the topic without assigning any responsibility to the platform directly, and it feels more of a "necessary evil" to be successful in this business. The discourse of competition is another recurring one; the presence of so many competitors sometimes leads to overworking or the overstepping of boundaries (although the creators do not declare it explicitly and tend to defend the theory of "you can do what you want at your own pace on the platform". It is often assumed that to be successful in this business, a significant amount of unpaid labour must occur through platforms outside of OnlyFans, as this does not help creators find an audience or market themselves effectively. Finally, creators define themselves, and are defined by other peers in the industry, as entrepreneurs or "their own bosses". This is due to the fact that the amount of income is not stable, but somewhat related to how much they "hustle", a concept that is often glorified. This comes as no surprise, as previous literature has proven that platform capitalism constantly hides itself behind euphemistic language.

The second group of findings relates to how creators discuss precarity and dependency on digital labour. The creators put a lot of labour and effort into "branding" themselves on external platforms. However, many of these (such as mainstream social media) are extremely strict, often shadowbanning or deleting performers' accounts even when they do not post anything that explicitly refers to their work. This creates a dependency on OnlyFans, as it has

few competitors in platforms that allow explicit adult work, while still risking losing followers (and consequently, a stable source of income).

The third group of findings relates to gendered matters, such as empowerment, oppression, misogyny, and unpaid emotional and aspirational labour. As much as it historically happened with many types of unpaid work which required emotional labour, digital female sex workers are no exception. Their work extends far beyond the creation and distribution of adult content: they must maintain a permanent, joyful, compassionate, and sensual persona that engages with male customers. An additional risk they consider is the possibility of encountering societal stigma without achieving any popularity at the outset of the process, which often restricts opportunities to those who can afford to work for little money, as defined by Duffy (2016) as "aspirational labour" (p. 443). Finally, the theme of empowerment, which is endorsed by neoliberal feminist values, are in contrast with a neo-Marxist vision which perceives this as exploitative. This tension is perceivable in the way creators describe their experiences, implicitly proving that the way they reached "freedom" was by overcoming the dynamics of feminine unpaid labour.

Connecting all the findings based on different theoretical perspectives, it is possible to answer the research question as a whole.

### 5.2 Discussion and Answer to the Research Question

This research aimed to answer the following research question: How do gendered experiences of precarity appear in the discourse of OnlyFans creators within platform capitalism? Through the application of critical discourse analysis as the central methodology, it is confirmed that an intersection of gender-based discrimination, unpaid labour, and the mechanisms of the platform economy influences the experiences the creators have on the platform. Thus, the gendered experiences of precarity appear through the constant tension between the discourses of empowerment, success, fame, and sexual freedom and the discourses of financial instability, discrimination, and the challenge of their boundaries. This research made evident that digital platforms shape not only their labour but also the livelihood and identities of the creators. The creators often celebrate being able to monetise their sexuality and gain financial stability; however, in the way in which they present their discourse, we can still understand that this work is precarious, stigmatised, and influenced by platform dynamics. The expectation to engage in continuous unpaid and emotional labour is often justified and rarely recognised as exploitation in creators' discourse, as can be seen by many of the linguistic choices highlighted in the analysis chapter.

This research demonstrates that gendered precarity is not only a material condition but also a discursive one, maintained through the words and narratives that creators use about themselves. Recognising the intersection of (implicit and explicit) references to platform capitalism, digital labour, and emotional labour in these interviews draws the research to the conclusion that these contradictions are not accidental. The clashing between two apparently antithetical discourses is due to the structure of the gig economy, which purposefully convinces creators of working toward their "freedom" and "empowerment" while denying them their fundamental work rights to be covered (e.g., pension, minimum income, paid sick or parental leave). Therefore, these contradictions emerge when OnlyFans creators describe their labour. In conclusion, to avoid reinforcing gendered patterns of precarity, we need to reframe how concepts such as agency, labour, and financial stability are understood in the digital world.

### 5.3 Societal Implications of this Research

This research aims to serve as a call for action regarding the societal and material conditions of creators who produce adult content on OnlyFans. As proven by this dissertation, many online sex workers are negatively affected by the moral stigmatisation and financial discrimination that they often encounter in their everyday lives. The platforms from which they gain their main source of income, rather than contributing to their economic stability, seem to enhance the financial and social precarity that is typical of digital labourers, with the difficulty that sex workers have in leaving this type of work due to the stigmatisation they face. Regardless from the different feminist perspective on sex work, where radical feminism sees it as inherently exploitative and neoliberal feminism as business oriented, the goal of approaching this research through neo-Marxist theory is to focus on the material conditions of inequality and injustice that they live, and to investigate solutions to make this job more stable and safer, leaving aside the moral dichotomy. Neither the stigmatisation nor the romanticisation of sexual labour results in creating better conditions for digital sex workers.

### 5.4 Suggestions for Further Research

As previously discussed, there is a need for academic research that focuses on sex workers' conditions, implying directly their experiences rather than talking for them. This dissertation keeps further research on the topic open. It has to be taken into consideration that in my research, I analysed the discourse of creator which come from different societal backgrounds: however, to different extend, they all come from relatively privileged position

(from English-speaking background, from developed countries, who do not need to perform illegal, in person sex work to survive).To have a more intersectional perspective, there is a need to extend particular research which focuses on different experiences, such as on creators who live and produce content outside of the Western world; POC creators; people with non-conforming bodies in a heteronormative society (e.g., transgender people, disabled people) who perform digital sex work.

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## APPENDIX A: DATA OVERVIEW

| Name of the creator and of the original video | Duration | Description of the content | Link to the original video |
|---|---|---|---|
| Allie Eve Knox: *Allie Eve Knox: Confessions of a Financial Dominatrix* | 00:49:53 | As a guest on the HollyRandall Unfiltered Podcast, creator Allie Eve Knox discusses her career as a financial dominatrix, the role OnlyFans played in enhancing her financial stability, and the financial discrimination she faced. | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p21xMZpioik |
| Alix Lynx: *Alix Lynx: The Self-Supporting Pornstar* | 00:59:14 | As a guest on the Holly Randall Unfiltered Podcast, Alix Lynx mentions how she utilised her skills from her previous marketing job to become popular on OnlyFans. | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Su1N4axKr5o |
| Bonnie Blue: *Bonnie Blue: I Went Viral for Banging Over a Hundred 18* | 00:54:21 | As a guest on the HollyRandall Unfiltered Podcast, Bonnie Blue talks about the origins of her career and how she controversially became famous for having shot content with newly | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7EYRlr5_Lr0 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Year Olds for OnlyFans* | | eighteen years old in Australia. | |
| Bryce Addams: *Bryce Adams: The Most Liked Creator on OnlyFans* | 00:56:18 | As a guest on the HollyRandall Unfiltered Podcast, Bryce Addams shares how she and her partner became an OnlyFans sensation in just a few years, reaching the top of the 0.1% of most paid creators on the platform. | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RS2Svj_qHYc |
| Indianamylf: *Ostracized OnlyFans Model-Indianamylf* | 00:23:59 | As a guest on the *Soft White Underbelly* podcast, Indianamylf discusses growing up in poverty due to family hardship and addiction, and how OnlyFans enabled her to achieve financial stability for the first time. | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7aMm7P1BC4E |
| Kazumi: *OnlyFans/Cam Model interview-Kazumi* | 00:36:26 | As a guest on the *Soft White Underbelly* podcast, Kazumi shares her upbringing in a rigorous Filipino family, and how sex work has always been her call due to her self-defined "hypersexuality". | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T-k6jD4t0Lk |
| Lena the Plug: *Lena* | 01:00:33 | As a guest on the HollyRandall Unfiltered | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L3-62sFwJIA |

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|---|---|---|---|
| *The Plug: Sex Work, Motherhood, and Why the Internet Went Crazy When She Slept with Another Man* | | Podcast, Lena the Plug talks about the stigma that mothers who decide to do sex work live, and how having done her first scene with a man that is not her husband (as she used to only film with him) made her boom in popularity on OnlyFans. | |
| Lily Philips: *I Slept With 100 Men in One Day \| Documentary* | 00:47:39 | In this interview/podcast/documentary, Lily Philips talks about how she started an OnlyFans, and shares her experience with having had sex with a hundred men in a single day. The interviewer also talks with the participants and with another creator, Alex Le Tisser. | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mFySAh0g-MI&t=8s |
| Naomi: *OnlyFans Model interview-Naomi* | | As a guest at the *Soft White Underbelly* podcast, Naomi shares her experience from leaving a successful and remunerative job in tech to becoming a full time OnlyFans creator | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sglut6KRRo0 |
| Sarah Juree: *Sarah Juree: Fired From* | 01:06:29 | As a guest on the Holly Randall Unfiltered Podcast, Sarah Juree discusses her struggles to | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VaECaO5KWCc |

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|---|---|
| *Teaching for Starting an OnlyFans!* | financially support herself and her children as a teacher, the impact of opening an OnlyFans account on her previous job, and how It Ultimately made her much more financially stable. |

## APPENDIX B: CODEBOOK

| Code | Discourse | Description | Quotations from the transcripts |
|---|---|---|---|
| Being your own boss | Platform capitalism | Self referring and being referred to as your own boss, not having a boss which controls your labour and your income | Sarah Juree 00:53:31: *A lot of people because it's the first time that women are able to be their own bosses and own their sexuality and own their finances in that way* |
| Branding | Platform capitalism | Presenting your persona online based on your physical appearance and the type of content you produce | Lena the Plug 00:01:29: *That's what porn is like a series of like cute tropes and little genres that become popular so I've been you know placed by others in my niche and then as my brand grew I just sort of embraced it* |
| Career Switch | Platform capitalism | Switching from a "mainstream" career to OnlyFans due to the desire of | Alix Lynx 00:11:30: *I was like well, I'm supposed to be doing a legitimate job, like, who am I? but I resigned from that. I started* |

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|---|---|---|---|
| | | trying something new or due to financial difficulties | *webcaming full-time, and like I loved it I killed it, and I loved it and I was like I love this, like this is incredible* |
| Competition | Platform capitalism | Having to compete with new talent, working harder, producing a wider amount of content and more extreme content | Alix Lynx 00:33:46 *you never know like one minute you're the favorite and then the next minute some new like producer comes in or something like that and they they don't like you anymore* |
| Entrepreneurship | Platform capitalism | Being refered to/self defyining as a entrepreneur, a business owner | Bryce Addams 00:54:40 *I always tell people that like sex workers are literally like entrepreneurs and they're business people like up and above everything it's different than what so many people expect* |
| Financial Discrimination | Platform capitalism | Incurring financial discrimination such as the inability to use | Allie Knox 00:25:38: *I opened up a PayPal and almost immediately got it shut down and they sent me an email and they were like you* |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | certain paying platform or open bank accounts due to the nature of the job | *violated our term service […] and they said that I was selling a sexual service and they wouldn't allow it and so then after that it just started like cash app venmo I mean just one after another Google Wallet everything that you could possibly imagine* |
| Financial Stability | Platform capitalism | Referring to OnlyFans as a career that allows to have enough money to feel stable and satisfied | Kazumi 00:13:54: *Financial Independence and owning your own money especially as a woman is so important […], if a situation is bad for me I want to know that I can leave* |
| Independence | Platform capitalism | Creating and handling your own content without having to rely on someone else financially | Sarah Juree 00:01:56 *Host: She is here as a successful content creator to tell her story about her journey from being a struggling mom to an independent businesswoman whose mission it is to* |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | *empower women through her own experience* |
| Freedom | Platform capitalism | Being able to work from everywhere, whener it is preferred | Naomi: *now I've really realized I don't have to live by anyone else's terms other than my own* |
| Poverty | Platform capitalism | Having lived or being living financial difficulties and struggles | Indianaymilf 00:09:21: *I grew up very very poor and wondering how I'm going to eat what I'm going to eat when am I going to get new school clothes* |
| Agency/Choice | Gendered Dynamics | Doing sex work purely out of choice | Bonnie Blue 00:46:19 *[My parents] just want me to be happy. And they could say the shift of how happy I was when I left working in an office job, being restricted to now traveling and living the most for me, the most beautiful life* |
| Boundary setting | Gendered Dynamics | Putting limits on the requests and | Indianamylf: |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | interactions that fan can move toward you | *I think my biggest one was 50,000 I don't care what offer anybody has for me it's going to be absolute no, I will not take any money offers never will never have absolutely not it's strictly online* |
| Emotional Labour | Gendered Dynamics | Keeping clients happy, satisfied, making them feel special and understood | Naomi: 00:18:03 *I really do have more of the time to like interact and get to know [the subcribers], the ones that like I know what they do for a living, they know where I came from […] we can talk about like how is your day you know* |
| Empowerment | Gendered Dynamics | Feeling powerful, in control of your own image and finances | Sarah Juree 00:55:12: *OnlyFans is revolutionary it's the only platform that allows women to empower themselves this way […], the truth is women are going to be sexualized no matter what you're gonna be sexualized* |

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| | | | *and so if you can monitor ties it and you can profit off of it and do it so in a way that my college degree couldn't do for me* |
| Feminism | Gendered Dynamics | Explicit references to feminism and female empowerment through this line of work | Lily Philips 00:20:01: *Feminist means like you just want equal rights for boys and girls and yeah I do what I want and I do it because I enjoy it I think there are obviously some women that maybe go into because they have to or need the money and stuff like that or they're kind of coached into it by men but my personal experien as only ever I've only ever felt empowered by the fact that I'm making money* |
| Societal Stigma | Gendered Dynamics | Social discrimination, rejection and ostracism due to the line of work | Bonnie Blue 00:10:53: *I've said so many times, I feel like the most damaging thing about the adult industry is the stigma that comes with it. Not* |

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| | | | *like specifically the industry itself* |
| Sexual Behaviour | Gendered Dynamics | Being openly very sexual and "promiscuous" compared to societal standards | Naomi 00:20:50: *I've always been kind of hypersexual and I don't necessarily think in a bad way I just have always kind of used it to my advantage so I think I think women are getting freer to express their sexuality and I think only fans is a vehicle to do that* |
| Identity Work | Precarious (Digital) Labour | Labour put to create your profiles and your identity on the platforms | Naomi 00:29:25: *everybody has their own market like some of some people I know that wouldn't be I like the way stereotypical like attractive like make crazy money like it's really just you have your own niche market* |
| Lack of discoverability | Precarious (Digital) Labour | Inability to search profiles on OnlyFans | Bryce Addams 00:19:40: *The thing about OnlyFans is that doesn't have great discoverability they're* |

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| | | | *changing that a little bit […] but it's still like not great* |
| Platform(s) dependency | Precarious (Digital) Labour | Depending on OnlyFans and on social media labour to maintain your source of income stable | Lena the Plug 00:25:12: *We know that OnlyFans has the network effect and yes we could all pivot to another platform that will not have the network effect that will not have all of us on it on it instagram is instagram because it's shit* |
| Precarity | Precarious (Digital) Labour | Instable income, lack of basic workers protections, retirement money | Lena the Plug: 0:28:02 *[If you made] a million dollars but i spent it all on rent in this great car and I have nothing and it turns out I yeah I can't get another job and i have to live on sex work till I'm 90 […] as a woman specifically because the men can go on to other things more easily […]. Women in porn, save your money you probably have to live on this money for the rest of your life.* |

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| Social Media Repression | Precarious (Digital) Labour | Having your account(s) deleted, shadow banned, or your posts taken down | Indianamylf 00:12:42 *I keep getting deleted on Tik Tok, I need more Tik Tok accounts just in case if I get deleted* |
| Social Media Labour | Precarious (Digital) Labour | Time and effort put to curate social media profiles and generate traffic from them | Indianamylf 00:12:42: *I have eight phones for all that and I post daily every single day on different Facebook accounts different Tik Tok accounts, so I'm constantly on my phone posting* |
| Unpaid Labour | Precarious (Digital) Labour | Time and effort put in OnlyFans and social media labour (e.g., promotion, editing, posting) that is not paid. | Indianamylf 00:13:58: *Host: when you're not shooting you're probably posting and editing and things like that OF creator: yeah it is a all day thing I get up at 6: a.m. go to the gym for two hours get home and then I'm constantly posting until my kids are home from school* |

## APPENDIX C: CODETREE