Sex Work Reimagined: Motivations in the Platform Era

Exploring Motivations and Challenges

of Platform-Mediated Sex Work

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of digital platforms in recent years has drastically changed the nature of sex work by making it possible for people to create content independently. Platforms like OnlyFans provide a meeting point between digital media, entrepreneurship, and sex work. With an emphasis on this platform, this study explores the reasons why people decide to engage in independent digital sex work on subscription-based platforms, and it is driven by the following research question: what drives digital sex workers to choose an independent business model? Seven participants, all of whom are active OnlyFans creators, participated in semi-structured interviews as part of the study. Six main themes emerged from the analysis of the interviews: 1) autonomy and control, 2) financial incentives, 3) platform affordances and accessibility, 4) visibility, empowerment, and identity, 5) community and social connection, and 6) navigating risks and precarity. Results generally indicate that participants appreciate the independence that this type of work offers, especially when it comes to self-management, creative freedom, and flexibility. Additionally, although not always the main one, financial incentives were pointed out as an important factor. In addition to navigating obstacles, participants also expressed strong feelings of empowerment through identity expression, creative autonomy, and community building. Their experiences show how digital sex work has the power to revolutionise traditional notions of identity and labour by challenging and blurring conventional dichotomies, such as empowerment versus exploitation and autonomy versus vulnerability. Through first-hand experiences of the possibilities and challenges of independent content creation in this industry, this study adds to the expanding literature and research on digital labour, sex work, and platform economies. It also emphasises the necessity of more comprehensive labour protections and public education. The results support the acceptance of digital sex work as valid labour and shed light on the various motivators that drive people to participate in this growing and more common type of employment.

KEYWORDS: *Digital sex work, OnlyFans, Platform Labour, Motivators, Independent business models*

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1. **Introduction**

Platforms have revolutionised the freelance economy. Digital technologies have significantly transformed work and labour environments in recent decades, enabling the rise of platform economies that have made labour more flexible, entrepreneurial, and precarious (Berg et al., 2018, p. 4; de Jong McKenzie, 2023, p. 22). As Berg et al. (2018, p. 7) note, platforms decentralise labour by offering greater autonomy, but they also shift financial risks to the workers, which makes working conditions more precarious. In addition to reshaping traditional industries, these digital infrastructures have created new spaces for forms of labour that have historically been stigmatised or marginalised, including sex work (Hamilton et al., 2022, p. 6). For example, the migration of sex work online has improved physical safety, greater control over earnings, and a reduction in dependence on third-party intermediaries. However, it has also introduced new digital vulnerabilities (Hamilton et al., 2022, p. 9). In this context, digital sex workers have disrupted longstanding hierarchies and gatekeeping mechanisms within the adult industry by adopting independent business models through subscription-based platforms such as OnlyFans (Cardoso et al. 2022, p. 181). The expansion of these platforms raises important questions about labour autonomy, digital entrepreneurship, and the motivations behind choosing this line of work (Hamilton et al., 2022, p. 8). As these workers navigate both opportunities and vulnerabilities, their experiences offer important insights into the changing nature of labour in a digitised, platform-mediated world. By placing digital sex work within the broader framework of platform and freelance labour, this thesis aims to contribute a more nuanced understanding of the economic, social, and affective dynamics at play in the creator economy (de Jong McKenzie, 2024, p. 26).

Nowadays, platforms such as Uber, Deliveroo, etc., provide sources of income for millions of people (Meijerink et al., 2021, p. 2). The affordances of such platforms, such as flexibility and autonomy, are very appealing to a wide population (Meijerink et al., 2021, p. 8), and they also allow for companies "to offload the risk of producing media onto individuals, infusing freelance work with instability" (Cohen, 2017, p. 1), characterising this type of work with the precarity that is often imposed on workers. This development is consistent with more general theoretical frameworks on platform capitalism and digital labour, which highlight how platforms have changed economic dynamics by converting interpersonal relationships and individual identities into commodities that can be bought and sold (Srnicek, 2017, p. 9; van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 2). Undoubtedly, one of the many platforms that has gained popularity in recent years is OnlyFans. This media platform allows creators to sell video clips, messages, photos, etc., directly to fans with a monthly subscription. This is in contrast to other platforms, such as YouTube and TikTok, where explicitly sexual content is banned and the content creators' revenues are based on their

views, following (Hamilton et al., 2023, p.1) and advertisement revenue. OnlyFans, as described on the platform's website, started as "a platform built for creators and fans" and highlights creative ownership, inclusivity, freedom, and safety as the main pillars of the platform's philosophy. OnlyFans flourished because it allowed content creators to monetise their own content, which is considered a breakthrough for content creators and adult entertainers as it offered a more independent business option, which also allowed them to have greater control over pricing decisions and ultimately over their revenue. It is worth noting that not all content on OnlyFans is adult-themed, and a diverse range of creators, including artists, fitness trainers, musicians, and lifestyle influencers, also use the platform, emphasising the need to understand the diverse motivations behind content creation.

The popularity of platforms, such as OnlyFans, is often attributed to adult entertainers and creators of sexually explicit content, which would explain why the platform had second thoughts after announcing a possible ban on such content (Hern & Waterson, 2021). Despite the non-disclosure of the actual figures, OnlyFans' profits are exceeding the ones made by the companies who are behind PornHub and YouPorn (Nilsson, 2022), and reached 3.1 million creator accounts and 238.8 million fan accounts (Thomas, 2023). Freelance work in the pornography sector has been booming by creating an intersection between digital sex work and subscription-based social media (Hamilton et al., 2023, p. 1). These changes within the industry also seem to be an indicator of a major shift in business models, where creators seek a more independent business model. Furthermore, it also highlights the creation of the intersection between independent digital sex work and the platform economy, which leads to raising questions and issues around the industry as the two, and possibly more, concepts are combined. This shift mirrors broader socio-economic trends, such as the normalisation of self-branding, the expansion of the gig economy, and the increasing demand for flexible, creative, and monetisable online labour (Duffy, 2017, p. 10). Nonetheless, this industry is still highly stigmatised as 'dirty work' even though it still faces many issues that can be found in other business practices and creative industries (Kopp, 2020, p. 18). This stigma makes the experiences of content creators on platforms like OnlyFans especially important to study, as they are navigating both economic opportunity and cultural marginalisation.

Despite the numerous discussions and the media attention, it is challenging to define what digital sex work entails, but it is often generally defined as "the Internet-mediated exchange of sexual commodities and/or services" (Jones, 2015, p. 560). The history of sex work is long and complex, intricately linked to historical, social, economic, and cultural changes. Yet digital sex work, also known as *online sex work* or *digitally mediated sex work* (van Doorn and Velthuis, 2018, p. 178), is a much more recent phenomenon that has emerged in combination with the growth of digital platforms and evolving forms of

online communication. The way that content is created, shared, and consumed has changed as a result of the move to digital platforms. The independent and self-directed nature of this work attracts a lot of people because it often offers more freedom, flexibility, and control over working conditions, in addition to a decreased dependency on outside organisations or intermediaries (Bernstein, 2007). There is still a lack of empirical research that focuses on the opinions, motivations, and lived experiences of independent digital sex workers, despite the industry's increasing importance and cultural significance. Given the rapid development of websites and platforms like OnlyFans, which have drastically changed the landscape of content creation and labour, the gap is especially noticeable. Therefore, a more thorough understanding of digital sex work as a type of modern labour is urgently necessary, as is research that critically engages with the subjective perspective of those working within these spaces.

This study wants to put independent content creators at the centre of the following question: *what drives digital sex workers to choose an independent business model?* In this research, it will be investigated what the main motivators are when individuals opt for an independent business model of digital sex work. By placing their voices at the centre, this study not only enriches our understanding of platform labour and its relative motivations but also has the potential to inform future discussions about labour rights, digital autonomy, and sex work regulation. Significant elements that can be implemented in future research and discussions will be brought to light and highlighted by the exploration of the possible advantages, risks, and problems of the industry.

2.   Theoretical Framework

Most existing research on sex work tends to focus on the broader cultural and societal implications of the pornography industry, such as its influence on audiences or the representation of queer communities and ethnic minorities in visual media (e.g., Miller-Young, 2014; Kohnen, 2015; Mercer, 2017; Goss, 2021). Even while these are important research topics, sex workers themselves, especially those who create digital content, continue to receive very little attention as key players in the sector. The limited literature that does address creators often centres on long-term psychological or physical impacts, or on legal and regulatory frameworks surrounding sex work. This gap emphasises the necessity of considering digital sex workers as entrepreneurial agents negotiating intricate socioeconomic systems rather than merely as subjects of representation or regulation. In order to address this, the current study focuses on individual producers and the reasons behind their involvement in platform-based and freelance economies within the context of digital sex work. This section does this by discussing theoretical viewpoints on the sex work industry, platform economy, and freelancing economy. The experiences of digital sex workers are placed into larger discussions about digital labour, autonomy, precarity, and platform governance by utilising these frameworks. This study intends to fill current gaps in the literature and provide a more complete understanding of digital sex work as labour by emphasising the actual experiences and motivations of digital content creators who are at the centre of this field.

2.1. The Industry of Digital Sex Work

In particular, when it comes to its systematic exclusion from formal labour politics and protections, the sex work industry, and digital sex work especially, shares many structural similarities with freelance labour. Both types of labour frequently fall outside of conventional employment categories, as it will be covered in the next section, leaving workers without institutional support and exposed to precarious situations. Sex workers, particularly those who work in digital spaces, are often marginalised in the labour market, employed in unregulated or informal sectors (Hamilton et al., 2022, p. 1), and frequently referred to as *invisible labourers* (Gilbert, 2023, p. 4) in both academic research and public discourse. As evidenced by the continued disregard for sex workers in mainstream labour research, policy reports, and economic analyses, this marginalisation is not only social or legal but also epistemic (Jones, 2015, p. 558). Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that the connection between digital technology and sex work is not new. On the contrary, "pornography and technology have enjoyed a close relationship in recent decades with multimedia technologies hugely increasing the porn sector's audience" (Morichetta et al.,

2021, p. 1). As an example of how platforms can support alternative labour models, digital tools have enabled content creators to access larger markets, exercise greater control over their work, and diversify their income streams, such as through subscriptions, tips, and custom content offerings. However, these advantages are accompanied by unequal outcomes, shaped by persistent exclusion, algorithmic surveillance, content moderation, and stigma (Hsieh et al., 2024, p. 57; Swords et al., 2023, p. 276; Hamilton et al., 2022, p. 9). This paradox highlights the necessity for rigorous, empirically grounded research that dives into the nuanced realities of digital sex work. It underscores the importance of centring practitioners' lived experiences and motivations in discussions about platform labour. These insights are vital for informing effective and inclusive research agendas, policy frameworks, and advocacy efforts (Muñoz et al., 2023, pp. 12–13; Hamilton et al., 2022, pp. 7–8).

Research by Swords et al. (2023) highlights four categories of internet-enabled sex work: face-to-face encounters coordinated through online channels, technology-mediated indirect experiences, access to sexual content without direct interaction with sex workers, and delayed or asynchronous engagement with sex workers and their content on platforms such as OnlyFans or Snapchat (p. 278). Additionally, internet-based sex work created new sex markets and reorganised how the field operates. New technologies have allowed more individuals, who either already had experience in sex work or have entered the business only through digital platforms, to be able to create and publish content on different media outlets. This has also been due to the interconnectedness between platforms and sex work (Swords et al., 2023, p. 277), allowing digital sex work to drastically change strategies, especially for the people who are self-employed, but it also highlighted risks that they might run into as "they: 1) published more information about themselves online, 2) produced and published more, and more explicit, content, and 3) developed a more widespread digital presence (i.e., created more work-related accounts on more platforms and on a wider variety of platforms)" (Hamilton et al., 2022, p. 3).

Despite the idea that, through digital sex work, creators can "maximize profits and reduce risk exposure" (Jones, 2015, p. 558), other risks might involve privacy violations and theft of content, in addition to harassment, de-humanization, and being stigmatised (Hamilton et al., 2022, p. 2). While the audience can find benefits from these practices, such as sexual gratification (Power et al., 2022, p. 57), it has been reported that digital sex work has significant benefits for workers, such as reduced risk of physical violence compared to in person sex work, greater freedom of expression which often came with the ability to reach a wider audience, more flexibility, and, in some cases, more chances to create a bigger revenue (Hamilton et al., 2022, p. 3). Due to the increase of the digital sex market, the lack of awareness from researchers and policymakers becomes quite apparent, and the

lack of straightforward content and policies concerning online sex work highlights how contradictory and labyrinthine regulations can be in their actual state (Sanders et al., 2018). These issues are already present when it comes to freelance work, becoming even more complex when they are mixed with issues concerning sexuality and politics.

2.1.1. Platforms and sex work

There is no doubt that the introduction and popularisation of platforms have directly influenced the sex work industry by replacing older forms of sex work (Cunningham & Kendall, 2011, p. 274). Online platforms have increased the visibility of sex work and introduced new methods of engagement, shaping how sex workers promote themselves and their services, interact with clients, and navigate between digital and in-person work (Pajnik & Kuhar, 2024, p. 1). Despite the lack of research on digital sex work, especially when it come to platforms and platformization of sex work, the emergence of online sex work has introduced a new range of questions for academic research (Jones, 2015, p. 560), and just as the internet fundamentally transformed the landscape of sex work, digital platforms have once again reconfigured the sector, introducing new dynamics and practices.

There is still no common way in which people who engage in this type of work define themselves. In the article *How OnlyFans Changed Sex Work Forever*, this dichotomy is represented by the following quote: "He may pay her to help him achieve an orgasm, though she is not a prostitute. He may purchase erotic videos from her, though she is not a porn star" (Bernestein, 2019), this highlights that the definition appears to be a hybrid, drawing on multiple conceptual frameworks and categories within the digital sex work industry. Furthermore, participants in a study conducted by Cardoso et al. (2022) navigated the identity tension between being sex workers and content creators, recognising the stigma tied to the former. Their experiences centred on two main themes: 1) how they produce, market, and manage customer relationships, and 2) the challenges of deplatforming, ethical considerations of sexual content, and the demonetisation of digital sex work (Cardoso et al., 2022, p. 181). Through these, OnlyFans workers describe their roles, responsibilities, and the stakes of sustaining their business, presenting themselves as *porntropreneurs,* a concept developed by Pezzutto (2019, p. 30), who blend entrepreneurship with the commodification of sexuality (Cardoso et al., 2022, p. 181).

At this point in time, Pornhub, with 80 million daily visits (Morichetta et al., 2021, p. 1), is one of the leading platforms of digital sexual labour, but its structure is substantially different from the one offered by OnlyFans. When it comes to platform models, it is possible to notice differences in platforms, for example PornHub operates as a free platform where revenue comes from ads and premium content, while OnlyFans' revenue comes from being

a subscription-based model. Additionally, when it comes to content upload and autonomy, on PornHub content often comes from studios or individuals (Snow, 2022), while OnlyFans gives creators full control over production, monetisation, and even interactions with users (Tynan & Linehan, 2024, p. 2289). As creators seek more control over their content and working conditions, these factors may help determine their preference for more independent options. These examples also begin to illustrate why workers may be inclined to prefer more autonomous platforms such as OnlyFans. In the case of OnlyFans, some of the reasons creators express appreciation for the platform are directly reflected in testimonials featured on the official website, such as:

"My favourite thing about OnlyFans is the flexibility it gives you to enjoy time with your friends, family, and basically work on your own schedule"
-Kieran Lee

"I love OnlyFans because I feel like it gives such independence to the creator" -Megan Barton-Hanson

"As a platform, OnlyFans puts all the power in our hands"
-Asa Akira

"OnlyFans has definitely given me a lot of flexibility in my life. I am able to do things now that I never thought I would be able to do. I can actually live out my dreams and I am super thankful for that"
-Audrey Li

As noted by the presence and content of several comments, OnlyFans promotes its platform by pointing out advantages such as flexibility, creativity, and creative autonomy. However, while it enables individuals to establish their own boundaries, it may also result in more complex and additional challenges that creators have to deal with in a "delicate balancing act" (Tynan & Linehan, 2024, p. 2304) when it comes to interacting and setting boundaries with subscribers. Another distinction between the two platforms lies in the mechanisms of performer promotion. On OnlyFans, content creators are primarily responsible for marketing their own material, often utilising external platforms such as Instagram and X (formerly Twitter) to expand their audience and following. In contrast, PornHub provides promotional support directly through its own platform infrastructure. Additionally, according to Cardoso and Scarcelli (2021), within the context of OnlyFans, the body becomes mediated through the platform, shaped by its affordances, logics, and performative pressures. (p. 116), which, once again, shows how platformed and digital sex labour can significantly vary in different circumstances and conditions of work. In navigating this delicate balance, content creators emphasise that, unlike in-person sex work, digital

and platformed sex labour often permeates all facets of one's life, a form of intrusion comparable to the pervasive presence of social media in everyday experience (Lawless, 2021).

2.2. Freelance & Platform Economy

Understanding the fundamental ideas of platform and freelance economies is crucial to comprehending the motivations of digital sex workers working in modern labour structures. These interconnected frameworks provide valuable insight into how work is evolving, especially in digitally mediated settings, where entrepreneurship, independence, and precarity frequently coexist (Cavallini & Avogaro, 2019, p. 180; de Jong McKenzie, 2024, p. 22). While it is now a major aspect of contemporary labour markets, freelancing can still be a dynamic and divisive concept. The variety of freelance work has created conceptual difficulties, making it hard to clearly define in various contexts (Kuhn & Maleki, 2017, p. 4; Wood et al., 2019, p. 64). Because platform-based labour blurs the lines between traditional employment and self-employment, the emergence of digital platforms has introduced another level of complexity (Calo & Rosenblat, 2017, p. 1637; Cavallini & Avogaro, 2019, p. 182). The purpose of this section is to give a practical definition of freelancing and to understand how it functions in the larger framework of the platform economy. This draws attention to the complexities that are often missed in public discourses, especially the variety of roles that independent contractors play, the reasons behind their actions, and the risks that they can face. The objective is to contextualise how digital sex workers, as independent contractors themselves, deal with the opportunities and manage the difficulties of the platform economy by basing this analysis on recent and appropriate literature.

How can we define freelancers? The freelance economy is divided into three types of work: *project work*, where a freelancer plays a role in delivering a business project; *gig work*, based on the often recurring performance of a particular task; and *portfolio work*, where a freelancer works on multiple projects or gigs at the same time (Burke, 2019). It is important to acknowledge that these terms are frequently used interchangeably across various studies and academic publications, making the establishment of a singular, universally accepted definition highly challenging. It becomes evident that media and policymakers often focus on what they consider low-skilled and precarious work and have the tendency to use 'gig-work' as an umbrella term where they include the vast majority of freelancers, forgetting that freelance work has more nuances that are often not talked about. Additionally, freelance work is generally understudied by scholars, which is also due to "complexities in defining and conceptualising freelance work, as well as from misunderstandings about the nature of the work now performed by many people who are considered freelancers" (Kuhn, 2016, pp. 157–158). Despite the definition of freelance work

being a subject of debate, in order to have a clear definition throughout this research, freelancers are to be considered as independent contractors who engage in temporary work arrangements with multiple clients, with compensation provided on a per-project basis, and are viewed more as independent entrepreneurs as the work is generally more independent and self-directed (Kuhn, 2016, p. 159).

Another concept linked to the notion of freelance work is what is generally referred to as the platform economy. Platforms, such as Airbnb, Uber Eats, Fiverr, Patreon, and many more, can be very different in structure and function. Digital platforms facilitate interactions between users, producers, and consumers (Kenney & Zysman, 2016, p. 62) and have now become part of our daily life (Dann et al., 2022, p. 1). At the same time, a growing number of independent workers are taking advantage of employment opportunities within the expanding platform economy (Masta & Kaushiva, 2024, p. 1365). This growth in popularity is probably due to platforms often advertising their services as flexible and autonomous, even though freelancers still must adhere to responsibilities and operating costs without the protection that employees usually benefit from (Vallas & Schor, 2020, p. 4). Nonetheless, people still have strong motivators that drive them to undertake freelance work, and these motivations are crucial in identifying and creating opportunities in the digital platform economy (Çiğdem, 2022, p. 506). Studies have highlighted the following as the main groups of motivators when it comes to independent work: job autonomy (Umair et al., 2023, p. 208; Perera et al., 2024, p. 310), remuneration (Perera et al., 2024, p. 311; Darmawan, 2021, p. 50), and social connection (Perera et al., 2024, pp. 311–312; Çiğdem, 2022, p. 513). In other studies, motivators include a feeling of life fulfilment, an increase in learning opportunities, more freedom and flexibility (which often increases the time they can spend with their loved ones), a way to generate extra income to support other projects, and a path that can create progress in their careers (Riyono & Usman, 2022, pp. 33-34).

In addition to the risks mentioned earlier, freelancers also have to actively protect their rights and improve their working conditions (Cohen, 2019, p. 235). Freelancers are usually "outside the ambit of labour protection" (Fudge, 2003, p. 36), which exposes this category to even more risks when it comes to exploitation and often leaves it excluded from labour politics and policymaking. By establishing non-standard employment arrangements, the platform economy's development under neoliberal labour frameworks has increased these vulnerabilities and produced a new class of workers with few protective measures, known as the "precariat" (Standing, 2011, p. 1). Also, uneven power relations between platforms and workers are frequently reinforced by algorithmic management systems and obscure performance measurements (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016, p. 3759). Despite being promoted as empowering, this labour organisation's platform logic frequently places the entire risk on the workers.

2.3. The Creator Economy and Creators' Motivators

The lines between employment, creativity, and personal expression have become more blurred as digital platforms have started mediating new forms of labour (Duffy, 2017, p. 213). For the people who work outside of conventional employment structures, like those involved in digital sex work, these changes have been particularly important (Wood et al., 2019, p. 59). Scholars have often focused more on the economic, legal, and moral aspects of sex work instead of the navigation of platforms, content production, and entrepreneurial labour by content creators (Cotter, 2019, p. 1241). Understanding how labour, identity, and agency are conceptualised in digital contexts is crucial, as this type of work requires complex negotiations between self-representation, marketability, and exposure (Duffy, 2017, p. 213). We can gain a better understanding of this often understudied and overlooked group by looking at other fields of study that explore how individuals from different fields create and sustain their presence as independent creators. Research on digital streamers, influencers, and digital freelancers offers important insights into labour mediated by digital platforms, especially when it comes to topics such as engagement, autonomy, and precarity. Placing digital sex workers and content creators within these broader frameworks helps gain a more comprehensive understanding of their work and can challenge current discourses that either stigmatise or oversimplify their experiences. This study intends to highlight the voices and experiences of digital sex workers and explore their motivations, how they manage risks, and assert agency in an environment impacted by constant changes. The following section adds to the corpus of research that sees digital labour as a practice that is deeply rooted in society and culture.

"Numerous studies have found the reporting of sex is sensationalized and intended to create controversy while journalists have little regard for the topic" (Middleweek, 2022, p. 1), which is shown by articles with titles such as "Tech-Savvy Prostitutes Trade Pimps for Web Pages" (NBC News, 2014), "More bang for your buck" (The Economist, 2014), "Addicted to OnlyFans? Why are men paying so much money" (Lewis, 2025), where the emphasis often appears to be placed on eliciting shock rather than engaging with substantive content, with the perspectives and experiences of sex workers rarely being represented. This is only one of the reasons why there is a lack of academic research around topics that deal with sex and (digital) sex work. Stigma, legal ambiguity, and institutional discomfort often prevent such topics from receiving the academic attention they deserve, resulting in gaps in the literature and a lack of robust theoretical frameworks that specifically address the experiences of digital sex workers. In this case, in order to compensate for these gaps, this section will be grounded in theories from various fields, where independent creators remain present while dealing with different kinds of content creation and are therefore studied more extensively.

The notion of content creator is closely linked to the concept of user-generated content, which "describes content that is accessible for the public, involves a creative endeavour and is created outside professional practices" (Weber et al., 2021, p. 4). When talking about the popularity of user-generated content, one of the first examples that could come to mind is social media influencers. Social media platforms play a pivotal role in driving the creator economy, where creators can cultivate communities and generate revenue from their content (Bleier et al., 2024, p. 411). Some of the creators are driven by creative expression or community building rather than financial gain, but for many individuals, content creation has developed into a primary source of income and they recognise that platforms can be a great aid to maximise visibility and engage a wider audience (Bleier et al., 2024, p. 419). Despite the popularisation of content creation and user-generated content on a variety of platforms, our understanding of influencers' motivations and actual practices remains limited (Weber et al., 2021, p. 1).

As shown by a study focused on food influencers conducted by Weber et al. (2021), when asked about their motivations for becoming influential food content creators, interviewees replied that in the majority of cases they started small and gained a bigger audience over time, while others highlighted a strong passion for social and digital media (p.7). Overall, participants call attention to the fact that they not only have a strong passion for promoting what they do, but they also observed that it serves as a potential source of income generation (Weber et al., 2021, p. 7). In the context of video game streamers, research has shown that their motivations often include the pursuit of recognition and financial gain, alongside intrinsic factors such as a desire for autonomy and active engagement within a community (Young & Wiedenfeld, 2022, p. 382). In addition, Young and Wiedenfield (2022) highlight what they define as *affective needs*, where many streamers are also driven by social and emotional motivations, such as the desire to meet new people, interact with their audience, receive support, and experience a sense of communal belonging (p. 390). For some streamers, streaming also becomes a way to uplift others, providing entertainment, companionship, or encouragement through their content (Young & Wiedenfeld, 2022, p. 390). Zimmer and Scheibe (2019) have grouped streamers' motivations in four different groups: 1) " need to communicate, exchange of views, relationship management, reaching a specific group, sense of mission", 2) "hobby, fun, self-expression, becoming a celebrity, self-improvement, making money", 3) "boredom, socializing, needing to belong, loneliness", and 4) "trolling" (p. 2541). Some of these groups identified in this study align with findings from previous research, reaffirming the key motivators driving content creation on digital platforms.

In other cases, an individual's business model can be influenced by a quest for creative freedom as different motivations and interests can trigger a substantial change

(Svejenova et al., 2010, p. 422). In a case study focused on the chef Ferran Adrià and the evolution of his business model, it becomes apparent that the change was driven by the necessity of independence and flexibility that his work required and his motivations are related "more to passion and vocation than to the pursuit of profits" (Svejenova et al., 2010, p. 424).

3.   **Research design and methods**

This research aims to gain a deeper understanding and create a constructive discussion regarding possible motivations and risk factors that independent sex workers and content creators in this field face in their profession when working on platforms like OnlyFans. In order to do so, a deeper qualitative analysis is necessary. This is done through semi-structured interviews. This common data collection method is often perceived as a relatively simple method that is both flexible and versatile (Kallio et al., 2016, p. 2955). Still, it ensures the rigorous collection of relevant data. Interviews offer a dynamic approach, allowing for interactions and reflective dimensions (Gubrium et al., 2012), ensuring that participants feel comfortable and free to openly talk about certain topics (Mashumba, 2023, p. 5) that are essential to this research.

In summary, this qualitative research study is based on semi-structured interviews as its primary empirical method, guided by a discussion framework specifically designed for this purpose. The questions have been developed to explore the study's central research questions, which emerged inductively from a comprehensive review of existing literature on digital sex work, the freelance and platform economies, the creator economy, and motivational factors. In the following sections, data collection, sampling, and data analysis will be introduced and explained further.

3.1. Data Collection

This research methodology includes a qualitative approach where people who have worked or are still currently working as content creators are interviewed in semi-structured interviews. During the interviews, the researcher has taken on a more receptive interviewing style (Wengraf, 2001), similar to semi-structured interviews, which allows for participants to have more freedom and control (Wengraf, 2001, p. 155), as the themes raised by the questions tend to be quite delicate and personal. Interviews are about the participant's sex work background, such as what they engage in, what kind of content they post, what platform they use and/or if they have preferences, etc. Their motivators, as well as the risks and rewards encountered in the industry, have been enquired into, whether that changes between platforms (if they have experience on more than one), and they were also asked what kinds of strategies and tools they use to run their business. Additional enquiries involve what they think about current policies, and if they would like to see any changes in the sector in the near or far future. Throughout the interviews, there has also been space for any additional topics the participants might have wanted to raise and discuss.

The methodological approach is similar to the one proposed by Huysamen (2022), where it is taken into consideration that "theoretical understandings of language, identity,

power, gender, and race have implications for how we as researchers understand our research encounters" (p. 29) and the implications these have on the researcher's position in the process and on how the interviewees' narratives are understood. The critical reflexive approach proposes itself as the best approach as discourses are understood to be actively deployed by both researchers and participants (Huysamen, 2022, p. 30). This approach also implies that interviews "become not only contexts where participants' narrative accounts are collected but also sites within which both the participant and the researcher perform, negotiate, resist, and construct their identities in relation to one another" (Huysamen, 2022, p. 30) and, by doing so, reflexivity, as suggested by and engaged with by feminist researchers, is a very important process throughout the research. In this case, it is fundamental not only to reflect on the positionality of the researcher, their social context, and their effect on the research (Gilbert & Sliep, 2009, p. 472), but also to actively and reflexively explore how the research is produced.

3.1.1. Sample and Sampling Strategy

The sample consists of at least 5 individuals, with an ideal target of up to 10 participants, who are actively working in the industry and specifically engaged in platforms such as OnlyFans. All the participants must have had some sort of experience in order to be able to answer the proposed questions. In this case, the gender or ethnic background of the participants has not been taken into consideration in sampling criteria as it is not relevant, but only participants who are 18 years old or older have been recruited. This decision has been mainly due to the fact that the research aims to be as complete and inclusive as possible, and within the digital landscape of sex work, the significance of geographic location, gender, or ethical background becomes considerably reduced.

As finding sex workers who are willing and have the time to talk about their experiences might be quite difficult, purpose sampling has been employed, which also allows the researcher to select participants who are the most appropriate for the purpose of the research (Etikan et al., 2016, p. 2). It has started by asking inner circles and subsequently relies on a snowball effect to find more participants. Additionally, to ensure that enough individuals will be reached, some content creators have been reached through social media, such as Instagram, Reddit and X (formerly Twitter), to enquire whether they would be willing to participate in the research. Taking advantage of *network communications technologies*, e.g. online discussion forums and social media, it has already shown to be an optimal way to not only reach people but also contact the population that the research is interested in and that can be a "notoriously difficult population to locate and engage" (Palys & Atchison, 2012, p. 355).

Once the participants were contacted, they were asked if they were willing to share

about one hour of their time for the interview, but this could have been subject to modifications if required by the participants. Interviews have been conducted online to facilitate the process and were recorded with the consent of the participant. Participants had the option of answering the interview questions in writing or by recording their audio responses in case they were uncomfortable participating in an in-person online interview. It is important to mention that five participants were interviewed in in-person online environments, such as Zoom, Teams, and Discord, while two decided to answer the questions in writing as it was more comfortable and accessible for them. The reason for this measure is to minimise the possibility of unnecessary stress or discomfort for the participant, while also protecting their psychological and emotional well-being. Unfortunately, it was not possible to compensate the participants for their time, but that can ensure that they participated voluntarily (Huysamen, 2022, p. 36).

3.1.2. Participant Overview

A total of seven people participated in this study; they are all active content creators in the digital sex work sector and have accounts on the subscription-based platform OnlyFans. All participants have had at least one year of experience in the field, and they were all found and contacted via social media platforms such as Instagram and X (formerly Twitter). Participants had to be at least 18 years old and actively using OnlyFans in order to be able to be included in the study.

Participants in the sample, whose age range goes from 22 to 37 years old, include four women, one man, and one non-binary person. This group of people, who are actively navigating the platform-mediated economy through independent content creation, is relatively young and diverse. Additionally, participants are geographically distributed across multiple regions: one woman is Indo-Fijian and currently resides in New Zealand, one is based in Austria, one in Canada, one in the United States, while both the male participant and the non-binary person are based in the Netherlands.

The sample definitely shows some diversity in terms of gender, cultural backgrounds, and geographic locations, despite its small size. Every participant has created and profited from the creation of sexually explicit content, and they all provided very insightful and important viewpoints on the incentives and difficulties of engaging in digital sex work, especially in a context of independent business models.

Before beginning the study and going through the interview, each participant gave their informed consent. All data, with the exception of general age, location information, and activity status, is kept completely anonymous in order to maintain protection for the participants and ethical integrity.

Table 1: *Overview of participants*

Participant	Age Range	Location	Activity Status + Years of Experience
P1	18-23	Austria	Active - 1 year
P2	18-23	New Zealand	Active - 2+ years
P3	18-23	Canada	Active - 2+ years
P4	24-29	USA	Active - 5+ years
P5	36-40	the Netherlands	Active - 1 year
P6	30-35	the Netherlands	Active - 5+ years
P7	24-29	the Netherlands	Active - 5+ years

3.2. Data Analysis

Once the interviews were concluded, they were transcribed and coded through an inductive and open-coded process. The first three interviews have served as the foundation for a preliminary codebook. In order to create a preliminary codebook, the first step was to carefully read the first three transcripts. Relevant codes were manually found in the interview transcripts and methodically categorised into groups by using the software Atlas.ti. As the remaining interviews were examined, this draft codebook was continuously improved, allowing for the addition of new codes and the revision of older ones. Finding important themes and recurrent patterns in the interviews was made flexible but methodical by this iterative process. In vivo coding has been shown to be particularly suited for this study, as it helps to retain the participants' original language and avoids premature interpretations that may stem from researcher bias (Seale, 2012, p. 372). The analysis has been conducted using qualitative data analysis to ensure that the process remained systematic, transparent, and replicable (Hwang, 2008, p. 521). The study adopts a thematic analysis approach, which is well-aligned with the aim of identifying recurring patterns across participants' narratives while maintaining a strong grounding in their lived experiences. Codes were grouped into broader categories and then synthesised into emerging themes, with constant comparison across interviews to ensure analytical depth and consistency.

By doing this, the study maintains its methodological transparency, traceability, and replication potential. This methodological overview was preceded by a descriptive summary of the participant group in the previous subsection. This includes information about the total

number of interviewees, pertinent demographics, such as age, gender, nationality, and background characteristics, such as duration of platform use. The following findings will be framed and placed in context by this contextual information.

Reflexivity has been integrated throughout the research process. A reflective journal has been maintained to account for the researcher's positionality and to monitor how personal assumptions may shape the interpretation of data (Berger, 2015). To further strengthen credibility and analytical rigour, memo writing and peer debriefing with academic supervisors or colleagues were employed during key stages of the analysis.

Given the sensitivity of the topic and the potential risks to participants, particular attention has been paid to ethical considerations. All interviews are to be anonymised during transcription, and pseudonyms are used in all reporting. Data is securely stored and handled in accordance with GDPR regulations. Ethical approval has been obtained from the participants, and informed consent has been secured prior to their participation.

While the analysis remains open to the discovery of unanticipated insights, initial sensitising concepts may include autonomy, precarity, digital visibility, emotional labour, and the negotiation of boundaries between personal and professional identity within platform-mediated work environments.

3.3. Saturation

Another important aspect of the research and data analysis has been data saturation, as it has achieved broad recognition as a principle in qualitative research methodology (Saunders et al., 2018, p. 1893). There are many ways that scholars describe saturation, but, in simple terms, it is used as one of the criteria to discern when it is justifiable to conclude the data collection and data analysis (p.1894).

In addition to different definitions of saturation, different models of saturation can have different points of focus in the process of research. As highlighted by Saunders et al. (2018), the principal foci of saturation are sampling, analysis, and data collection (p. 1897). Consequently the four different models corresponding to the foci of saturation are: *theoretical saturation*, that pertains to the formulation and advancement of theoretical constructs, *inductive thematic saturation*, which is linked to the development of new codes and themes, while *a priori thematic saturation* refers to how well the identified codes or themes appear in the data, and *data saturation* indicates the extent to which new data confirms or reiterates previous findings (Saunders et al., 2018, p. 1897). When it comes to the saturation of data, this often becomes apparent when researchers reach a point where data starts to be redundant, as explained by Grady (1998, in Saunders et al. 2018, p. 1896). One example of this is when the same themes are reiterated across multiple interviews. Another example of data saturation can also be found within the individual

interviews. In this case, "saturation operates not at the level of the dataset as a whole, but in relation to the data provided by an individual participant; i.e. it is achieved at a particular point within a specific interview" (Saunders et al. 2018, p. 1896). This allows the researcher to understand at what point it is logical to conclude each interview as enough data is collected.

In the context of this study, it became clear that the data started to show indications of saturation following the fifth interview. The main themes emerged consistently across participants and interviews. Despite the initial research design aimed at ten interviews, it was decided to stop the data collection after the seventh as no new themes or information were emerging. As mentioned earlier, these factors are often regarded as crucial signs for thematic saturation, and it has been decided that stopping the interview process at this point was methodologically appropriate by guaranteeing that the study remained efficient while also collecting a wide and significant range of participants' experiences and viewpoints.

3.4. Ethics of the Research

The aim is to make the research design as ethical as possible, which is especially important when working with stigmatised and potentially vulnerable groups (Dewey & Zheng, 2013, p. 23). Informed consent is a requirement for participation, as it ensures confidentiality and helps establish a trusting relationship between the researcher and participants (Dewey & Zheng, 2013, pp. 26–30). Participants are accurately and thoroughly informed about the goals and scope of the research prior to the beginning of each interview. They are also reminded that they can withdraw their consent at any time during the research process and that they have the right to remain completely anonymous. Furthermore, they may refuse to answer any questions that they find too sensitive or uncomfortable and are encouraged to raise any concerns regarding the research and its procedures.

To ensure secure handling of data, all recordings and transcripts have been stored in encrypted, password-protected digital files. Personal data has been removed or pseudonymised during the transcription phase. In compliance with GDPR regulations and the ethical guidelines of Erasmus University Rotterdam, data is only to be retained for the duration necessary for analysis and can be securely destroyed thereafter.

In addition, the research adopted a reflexive and care-based approach. Recognising the power dynamics involved in researching marginalised communities, the researcher remains critically aware of their own positionality, reflecting on how personal assumptions, background, and identity may shape the research process (Berger, 2015). A trauma-informed approach has also been adopted to create a safe, non-judgmental space for participants. Interviews were guided by empathy and attentiveness to verbal and non-verbal

signals of distress, and structured flexibly to prioritise the well-being of participants.

Additionally, participants were also given the option to review either the full transcript of their interview or a summary related to their individual contributions. By giving participants the opportunity to confirm that their opinions were accurately represented and to elaborate on any statement if they felt the need to, this procedure was meant to increase the credibility and accuracy of the data. It also acted as an ethical safeguard in order to guarantee that the participants' experiences were interpreted correctly and without bias. Despite having this option, none of the participants indicated that they would like to edit or comment on their transcripts, which can indicate that they were generally satisfied with the way their contributions were reflected in the research.

4.   **Results**

The purpose of this section is to carefully examine the primary drivers of engagement with more independent subscription-based platforms that digital sex workers and content creators in the field themselves have identified. In this section, the aim will be to provide a thorough and nuanced understanding of the personal, professional, and structural dynamics influencing content production in the context of independent digital sex work by carefully and methodically analysing the qualitative data collected through in-depth interviews. The interview material was interpreted using an inductive and open-coded thematic analysis, as mentioned in the previous section. This analytical method was chosen to reduce researcher bias and promote the natural emergence of unanticipated findings by keeping emergent themes based on the participants' own words and lived experiences. The primary themes that emerged from the data will then be presented in this chapter, each of which will be supported by representative quotes from participants and examined in light of pertinent literature. In order to address the implications for understanding digital labour, platform economies, and the changing nature of sex work, the discussion section will ultimately draw connections between these findings and more general theoretical frameworks.

4.1. Emergent Themes

The qualitative interviews resulted in six overarching themes, each of which represented a unique but frequently linked aspect of the participants' lived experiences. The development of these themes involved a thorough coding process in which the participating content creators shared a range of insightful and multifaceted information. Thematic categories show how their involvement in independent digital sex work is shaped by both structural and personal factors.

The resulting codes were used to create the six categories as follows: 1) *autonomy and control*, which refers to the flexibility with which participants manage their schedule, boundaries, and content; 2) *financial incentives*, including both long-term financial goals and income generation; 3) *platform affordances and accessibility*, emphasising how technical features and ease of use influence creators' choices; 4) *identity, empowerment and vibility*, including the ways in which content creation enables people to express themselves and reclaim agency; 5) *community and social connection*, highlighting the importance of interaction and mutual support between audiences and creators, and 6) *precatity and risks*, addressing issues of safety, stigma, and instability.

Each of these themes is summarised in *Table 2* and covered in detail in the sections that follow, backed up by quotes from the interviews that serve as examples and illustrations and placed within the wider corpus of academic research.

Table 2: *Summary of the six emergent themes identified in the analysis of interviews*

Theme	Definition	Example
Autonomy and Control	The extent to which digital content creators can make decisions on their own regarding workflow, content production, scheduling, revenues, and audience engagement.	"For me [independence], it's everything. Because I suffer from fibromyalgia, you know? So, there are some days that I'm like, I can't make it. I'm just going to lie in bed. And with the kind of work that I do, you know, since I'm my own boss, I can't just do it. Yeah, I don't have to explain myself to anyone."
Financial Incentives	Financial incentives that encourage independent content production by creators, especially on subscription-based platforms.	"Of course, revenue both for life and pursuing long-term wealth, is a big motivator for me as well."
Platform Affordances and Accessibility	Features and functionalities offered by digital platforms (such as OnlyFans) and the impact they have on how creators engage with their audience, produce content, and manage their business.	"Even though the site is more complicated to learn, there's a lot more features that are better for us."
Identity, Empowerment, and Visibility	The ways in which digital content creators improve their social and professional visibility, express their individuality, and acquire a sense of agency through the creation of content on digital platforms.	"I've turned it into a way to give myself some power back and defy a system that shames women for sexuality while objectifying them in the same breath. If I'm going to be treated this way regardless, then fine, but at least I am going to get paid for it."

Community and Social Connection	The emotional and relational aspects of digital sex work, in which content creators use their platforms to find and build relationships and a community with people.	"Once I have entered the industry, I realised that the great thing about this industry is the support system. The community is absolutely incredible. Everyone is always looking out for each other. It is just so impeccable. I really like that."
Navigating Precarity and Risks	The methods employed by digital content creators to manage the structural, social, and financial risks often associated with their work.	"I know that Only Fans isn't gonna work forever. I think it has an expiry date, at some point. This platform isn't working anymore. Not because of me or because of my team or because of my body, or I don't know. I think just because of social media, I think it's going down at some point."

4.1.1. Autonomy and Control

Autonomy and control refer to the extent to which digital content creators can work independently and make decisions concerning their work processes, such as content creation, scheduling, pricing, audience interactions, etc., without the oversight of agencies or third-party employers. This theme is about the ability to regulate one's labour, establish personal boundaries, and maintain ownership. This can also include the flexibility to choose the kind of content that aligns with the individual's own values and comfort zone, allowing artists to shape the narrative around their creation of content in ways that are personal, genuine, and independent. As previously illustrated by Riyono & Usman (2022, pp. 33-34), this is often experienced as a key motivator as it offers individuals more flexibility, creative freedom, and an increased sense of control due to the direct management of their own businesses and work environments, which is usually in contrast to traditional employment structures, where external parties often retain significant control. In this case, autonomy allows content creators to produce and manage their work on their own terms, which can also offer psychological and emotional benefits in addition to financial ones. It is important to remember that in stigmatised fields such as digital sex work, where control over one's image and boundaries is especially important as it promotes a greater sense of autonomy, control, and empowerment.

The interviews provided deep and insightful perspectives on the meaning of autonomy and control for a range of different individuals, in addition to what matters to them in terms of work-life balance and work schedule. All the participants highlighted how

important it is to them to have the autonomy to choose the type, frequency, and timing of their processes of content creation without external influence from either agencies or employers. This aspect was strongly linked by many to personal agency, professional fulfilment, and an overall sense of control and empowerment over their work and personal free time. As one creator noted, "For me, [independence] is everything. [...] I don't have to explain myself to anyone."

It is also important to acknowledge that content creators organise and oversee their work in a variety of different ways. There is no doubt that autonomy is very frequently mentioned as a primary motivator, but creators can still be interacting with different and varying levels of independence. Two participants (P1, P3) mentioned that they're either currently working with management teams and agencies to support particular areas of their business, such as messaging customers, and tracking and eliminating leaks of content, or have in the past. These participants have also pointed out that these services can be very helpful when it comes to handling the practical side of platform-based work, as it can be very time-consuming, especially when the size of the audience and visibility grow. On the other hand, many interviewees have made it clear that they prefer to remain totally independent of agencies and third parties. These creators have expressed that they value and have a strong commitment to managing themselves and their work. Even though this method means more work for them and involves more responsibilities, they also feel like this allows them to interact with their audiences with integrity and authenticity. For these individuals, this was also associated with a sense of authority and ownership over their creative labour, and it usually led to more genuine and intimate connections with their subscribers. One participant pointed out that they have been managed by an agency for a year, but then decided to return to being completely independent as they felt it was more true to themselves and what they valued in their work. Nevertheless, one participant (P2) stated that despite their strong commitment to self-management and passion for their work, they also would like to eventually hire assistants who could help them manage the workload (e.g. "I've been wanting to hire a couple assistants to help me out. [...] It's just getting out of hand. It's just becoming too much for me"), while another stated that they would consider collaborating with an agency only if that would be beneficial for their business.

Additionally, it is also critical to highlight the experience of one participant (P3) who has a chronic illness. The interviewee in this case emphasised how working as an independent digital content creator gave them the ability and flexibility to modify their type of work and work schedule to fit their emotional, psychological, and physical capabilities and needs, choosing and managing the hours they could or wanted to work. This extent of flexibility can also help lower stress levels, which, in some cases, could worsen the condition, in addition to offering a source of income. Overall, the ability to manage their own

time independently and self-manage the workload as well was presented as a means of autonomy and control and a good substitute for conventional work arrangements, which frequently do not provide the accommodations required for people with chronic conditions or illnesses to work. Throughout the conversation, it became evident that having more freedom and control over their own work is not only desirable but also functionally a necessity. This was presented as one of the main factors in their decision to seek a more independent type of employment as a digital content creator. This specific case emphasises how platform-based creative labour can provide a more accessible and autonomous employment option for people who may, for different reasons, encounter obstacles in more traditional job markets.

This variety of experiences and different points of view show how control and autonomy are flexible concepts and can be dependent on an individual and their own perspective. It has also been shown that various forms of autonomy are preferred by different creators according to their capacities, values, and goals. As a result, content creators' personal strategies and considerations concerning their line of work can also be an influence over the extent and type of control they exercise.

4.1.2 Financial Incentives

Financial incentives refer to the economic motivations that drive independent content creators to pursue content creation, particularly on subscription-based platforms such as OnlyFans. These incentives often include the potential for generating higher revenues and more direct earnings, more control over pricing, and the ability to diversify the incomes generated even on the platform alone (such as tips, custom content, subscriptions) (Lykousas et al., 2020, p. 185; Hamilton et al., 2023, p. 3). The possibility of creating an expandable revenue model, in which profits increase in direct proportion to their visibility and engagement, is often very attractive for creators. This also means that they can eliminate intermediaries that usually reduce profit margins. By getting rid of third-party agencies or production companies, creators can keep more of their profits while also having more freedom in how they handle their revenue.

For many individuals, financial incentives represent a means of economic survival, but also a way to financial independence, stability, and long-term entrepreneurial growth. Additionally, in some cases, the financial control allows them to reinvest into the creation of their content, as one participant (P4) noted: "I invest 25% of my monthly income". This generally improves quality, expands their brand, and ensures long-term sustainability. Additionally, the income flexibility that comes with platform-based work allows some creators to work on other personal or professional goals at the same time as making content. Financial incentives being a major motivator for freelancers and digital content

creators was already discussed by Weber et al. (2021, p. 7), and it has been reconfirmed throughout this study.

All of the participants pointed out that financial incentives are a major factor in their decision to enter and/or stay in the industry, but, as one participant noted "We're not all doing it just for money. Some of us are here for the art, the expression, the joy of being seen on our own terms", which also stressed that this was not the only or main motivating factor. Financial incentives overall served as an important enabling factor that expanded other goals, both in the personal and professional spheres. In comparison to traditional work environments, some of the participants explained how the platform-based content creation gave them more flexibility and financial stability. For example, one interviewee (P1) discussed the financial benefits of content creation by pointing out that they now make significantly more money while working significantly fewer hours than they did in their previous corporate position, while another (P4) pointed out that by being a content creator, they could be more present for their kid and did not have to worry about the financial side of their life. These changes were presented as a change that offered better autonomy and work-life balance, in addition to the generation of higher income. Another creator (P2) explained how their initial entry into content production was initially meant to be a part-time job, but eventually, as their online presence grew and income increased, this 'side gig' turned into a stable and rewarding full-time job.

One participant (P3) in particular also highlighted that it can be very challenging to maintain a stable job, and therefore a stable income, for people with chronic health conditions, as traditional employment models often do not accommodate their needs. They have explained how, in the past, it was practically impossible to maintain a steady job, often due to the strict schedules, physical demands, and lack of flexibility in traditional work environments. On the other hand, content production has been revealed to be a more flexible option that could be adapted to different and changing health needs. In this way, they were able to maintain a source of income without sacrificing their mental and physical well-being, as they were able to work from home, set their own hours, and ultimately choose the volume and pace of their workload.

Similar to how the level and extent of autonomy can differ based on whether content creators work alone or with agencies or outside managers, there is also a variation in terms of financial incentives, as the creators' earnings can dramatically change when they decide to work or collaborate with agencies. Even though websites and platforms already take a percentage of the creators' earnings as a commission (for example, OnlyFans takes 20% of every creator's generated revenue on the platform), using external agencies can result in additional financial losses. The participants, throughout the interviews, have reported a wide range of commission rates of different agencies: one said that an agency might deduct

30/40% of the creator's income, another stated that some agencies can take up to 60/70%, while many participants have not disclosed any information. Overall, these numbers show a significant reduction in net profits, which may have an impact on how digital content creators weigh the costs and benefits of such contracts. Although external agencies may take a significant amount and share of the revenue, content creators actively choose how their collaborations and work are organised. Some participants think that hiring a third party to handle responsibilities like communications with fans or content protection (such as eliminating leaked material) is worth the financial sacrifice. Other participants, on the other hand, believe that the advantages of contracting agencies are outweighed by the want and need to maintain complete financial control. This variety of methods and opinions emphasise once again how platform labour can be complex and individualised, and that it is crucial to acknowledge creator agency when choosing the model that best suits their financial, professional, and personal objectives.

These examples highlight how the financial incentives in the platform economy can be flexible and dynamic. The possibility of higher income, especially in contrast with the instability, inflexibility, or low pay of traditional labour, was a strong incentive for many digital content creators to enter and stay in the digital sex industry. Additionally, the ability to scale and diversify revenue streams, including tips, subscriptions, and original content, also added to the appeal of this type of entrepreneurial work.

4.1.3. Platform Affordances and Accessibility

Platform affordances and accessibility refer to specific features and functionalities offered by digital platforms, like the ones offered by OnlyFans' platform, which shape how content creators engage with their audiences, produce content, and manage their business. Affordances often include tools for monetisation, interaction with an audience (such as direct messaging and the ability to ask for custom requests), control over content (such as paywalls and overall control over scheduling), and data analytics. These tools let creators change how they work and interact with their audiences in an intentional way, which helps them stay independent. On the other hand, accessibility refers to and includes both the platform's openness to a wide range of creators, independent of their location, background, or previous professional experience, as well as its technical usability, which often includes elements such as user interface and access (Lawrence, 2024, pp. 3-5). The platforms' low entry barriers frequently make them particularly appealing to underrepresented or marginalised groups looking for alternative sources of income. These combined elements can have a big impact on a digital creator's choice to use and stay on a certain platform, and can lead us to think that platform loyalty and long-term engagement can be influenced

by how simple and user-friendly the platform is, as well as how much creators feel supported by tools and policies.

The importance of the platform's affordances and accessibility was often suggested in the participants' narratives, despite not being explicitly stated as a major theme throughout the interviews. No participants specifically pointed out these characteristics as primary or main motivators, but their experiences indicate that the platform's features and ease of access were appreciated. Nevertheless, two creators highlighted some of the platform's features as being user-friendly, which, combined with the ease of use, made it easier to use for people to access and use, even without prior technical experience. These participants also highlighted the importance of features like content scheduling, direct messaging, and the capacity to manage custom requests, which allows for greater engagement with their audiences. These affordances are characterised as empowering by the participants, as they allow creators to have direct control over their content schedule, interact directly with fans, and respond to individual requests, which can strengthen the sense of community and authenticity. Alternative working models, where digital content creators collaborate or are managed by agencies or managers who can take on many of these responsibilities, are in contrast with the strategy highlighted earlier. In these cases, the agency frequently manages the content schedule, handles interactions with the audience, and makes strategic decisions regarding what content to create based on marketability and current trends.

Some content creators have indicated that platforms like OnlyFans, in particular, attract a lot of digital content creators because of their user-friendly interface, accessibility, and overall ease of use, which can significantly reduce the barriers to entering this field of independent content production and monetisation. People without extensive technical knowledge or previous industry experience may find the platform particularly appealing due to the simple tools for uploading, scheduling, and communicating with subscribers. Even though they value OnlyFans' ease of use and accessibility, a number of participants pointed out that they would be open to working on other platforms that provide more advanced or unique features. Unfortunately, these platforms usually do not have a large audience or general popularity, as OnlyFans does, which makes them less ideal and practical as a main source of income.

Platform accessibility can still be a significant factor that influences the daily tasks and overall labour of independent content creators, even though it may not have been a recurring theme in responses.

4.1.4. Identity, Empowerment, and Visibility

Identity, empowerment, and visibility are terms that refer to the ways in which digital content creators use platform-based content creation to express personal identity and increase their social and professional presence. For many creators, engaging in digital sex work can allow them to express their gender, sexual, or creative personal identities that might be marginalised in traditional labour environments. The capacity to establish boundaries, make independent decisions regarding one's appearance and own content, while also fighting stigmas related to sex work, is all components of what can be defined as empowerment. On the other hand, the ability to connect and be known by a worldwide audience is known as visibility, which can lead to a feeling of approval as well as improved marketability. When taken as a whole, it becomes obvious how these elements can influence how people create content and express themselves and their identities in ways that are financially and emotionally significant.

Some participants (P2, P6, P7) in particular talked about how their work has a deep and personal significance, not just in terms of financial gain but also as a necessary extension of their identity and a tool for self-expression. They have explained how it is greatly empowering to be able to express their personal and sexual identity through content creation. These individuals, in particular, saw their work as a way to self-affirm and have agency and control that went beyond the generation of revenue. Other participants also talked about how their work empowers them and said that the flexibility to produce their own content on their own terms gives them a sense of empowerment. Additionally, they have also highlighted how working independently allowed them to live a freer and more authentic life in ways that did not seem possible in conventional professional environments. According to one participant, sex work was an important tool to regain control over aspects of their sexuality, even though they primarily saw their work as a way to accomplish financial goals.

Overall, the insights highlight in which ways independent content creation can be a platform for self-expression, empowerment, and visibility, in addition to elements discussed earlier, such as autonomy, control, and financial incentives.

4.1.5. Community and Social Connection

Community and social connections refer to the relational aspects and emotional dimensions of digital sex work, where independent content creators can seek and cultivate connections with other people either through or thanks to their platforms. This often involves creating and developing networks of support, cultivating close or interactive connections with their audiences, and creating a sense of community and belonging with others in the creator community. This can include what Young and Wiedenfield (2022) highlight and define as

affective needs (p. 390), as explained in the theoretical section. In a field that is often stigmatised and possibly isolating, these social dynamics offer many individuals professional solidarity, in addition to emotional support and validation. Additionally, social connections can often improve engagement, loyalty, and perceived authenticity in content creation, while having a community can be a source of resilience and empowerment, and it also offers a space for learning, as noted by one participant: "I have learned this job. I've been learning from day one. It is incredibly humbling. [...] I am not only my own manager, I am my own marketing person. I'm my own assistant. I have to do my own taxes. So many things you just have to learn, it's crazy."

Throughout the interviews, a clear division became apparent when discussing the theme of social connections and communities. Some participants (P2, P3, P6, P7) discussed the growth of a sense of community, belonging, and support among other content producers in the industry (e.g. "Once you enter the industry, the great thing about this industry is the support system. The community is absolutely incredible. Everyone is always looking out for each other. It is just so impeccable. I really like that."). They highlighted how their peers also frequently function as groups to exchange information, support each other emotionally, uplift other members of the community, and share useful and helpful tips about content creation, safety measures and precautions, and how to navigate this often complex field.

On the other hand, creators (P2, P3, P6, P7), especially the ones who independently manage their own accounts, have highlighted the importance of developing deep and meaningful social connections with their fans and subscribers. These connections can create real emotional connections and a sense of understanding between the subscriber and the creator, even though these connections are often mediated by financial exchanges.

This double-layered connection, both with the audiences and with other creators in the community, highlights how linked emotional labour is to digital sex work and how important it is to independent content creation.

4.1.6. Navigating Precarity and Risks

The navigation of precarity and risks describes how digital content creators deal with the social, economic, and structural risks related to their work and labour. These often include unpredictable finances, a general lack of legal safeguards, platform dependence, content theft, unexpected and abrupt policy changes, and social stigma (Hamilton et al., 2022, p. 537; Soneji et al., 2024, p. 8). In addition, content creators often have to deal frequently with potential harassment, privacy issues, and emotional labour. Even though digital platforms can provide a certain amount of autonomy and independence, these digital

workers often work in unpredictable environments where even professional boundaries are constantly negotiated, and income can be unpredictable as well. This theme shows how creators maintain their flexibility and resilience in an environment that is characterised by unstable working conditions and a lack of access to conventional labour laws.

Digital content creators also highlighted different aspects of risk and precarity that are often characteristics of their profession throughout the interviews. According to some of the participants, one of the most critical issues is the job's instability and precarity, as it is often characterised by unpredictable revenue, a lack of benefits, and a significant dependence on a platform. Because of this dependence, digital creators are put in a precarious position where sudden changes could have a big impact on their ability to make a living.

All participants recognise the stigma that is often attached to their work and have noted this wider social stigma associated with sex work as an additional level of precarity, pointing out that sometimes people who are not entirely ready or have not considered the possible long-term repercussions of being linked to sex work might be attracted to the industry due to its apparent ease of entry, which is made possible by the platform's accessibility. In a discussion regarding the severe psychological effects of stigma, one participant said that these possible repercussions from societal stigma aimed at sex workers can have disastrous effects, even pushing some to think about or end their lives.

Additionally, interviewees (P2, P4) highlighted the lack of standardised policies and regulations, which adds to the psychological risks and makes their work even more precarious. This lack of official protection is particularly concerning when content creators collaborate with others either in person or virtually. When it comes to in-person collaboration, because even standards for sexually transmitted disease (STD) testing and disclosure differ greatly by region, participants emphasised the significance of having clear protocols regarding topics such as consent, digital security, and health screening.

When it comes to maintaining their professional standards and safety, the majority of creators must handle and manage things themselves. Without official labour laws or industry-wide regulations, they have highlighted that they frequently have to create and carry out their own contracts, like non-disclosure agreements (NDAs), in order to protect their personal boundaries and content. They also have to carry the financial burden of routine health and safety precautions, such as complete STD testing and screening every two weeks. In addition to showing the entrepreneurial nature of their work, this self-regulation highlights a significant lack of institutional support and the degree to which the management of risks is completely left to the individual.

Some participants (P1, P2, P3, P4, P6, P7) declared a strong belief in the possibility of change in spite of these obstacles. In order to fight the stigma and normalise their work,

many content creators argued that there is a strong need for an overall increased public education and awareness. They see these efforts as crucial in order to build the foundations for increased institutional recognition and policy support, as well as helping to improve societal perceptions.

4.2. Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to examine and investigate the reasons why people decide to perform independent digital sex work, especially on platforms like OnlyFans. Six main themes were highlighted from the analysis of interviews with digital content creators: 1) autonomy and control, 2) financial incentives, 3) platform affordances and accessibility, 4) identity, empowerment and visibility, 5) community and social connection, and 6) navigating precarity and risks. In addition to the analysis of the broader effects of platform labour, digital work, and sex work research, this section will focus on these findings in the context of the body of existing literature.

One of the main motivators for all participants was the desire and need for autonomy and control. It has been highlighted that digital content creation allows for a great extent of independence, which can be contrasted with traditional sex work and traditional employment structures. According to participants, one of the main motivations for entering and staying in this field was the opportunity to was the opportunity to control their work schedules, establish their own boundaries, and retain their own creative freedom. This is in line with more general research that has been conducted on digital labour, which also highlighted independence as a main motivator for platform-based and freelance work (Duffy, 2017). These results have also demonstrated that there is a whole spectrum of autonomy, which is often affected by whether creators work independently or in collaboration with external organisations. In some cases, creators have decided to sacrifice a percentage of their profits for help with marketing, messaging subscribers and fans, and content moderation. This shows how autonomy can be managed based on each person's needs and abilities rather than being in a fixed state. Although some of the workload may be reduced by this model, the creator's direct involvement and agency are also diminished. Therefore, the decision between agency-supported and independent work is usually not just based on practical considerations as it also takes into account other preferences regarding audience relationships, creative control, and labour autonomy.

Financial incentives were also a significant factor, but they were not always the main motivator. This type of work may be appealing due to the possibility of high revenue, control over pricing, and several revenue streams (such as subscriptions, custom content, and tips). Additionally, some participants pointed out both financial benefits and a generally better work-life balance when comparing their current work structure with prior experiences

in traditional employment. Nevertheless, using third-party agencies often led to lower profits. These arrangements, in addition to OnlyFans' 20% platform fee, highlight the challenge content creators can encounter when working in the creator economy. These results are generally consistent with studies on gig and freelance work, where it has been highlighted that income is a source of motivation but can also be a point of vulnerability.

Participants have also mentioned OnlyFans' usability and functionality as important considerations. Because of these affordances, creators are able to interact directly with their audiences and develop a more personal brand. Participants have also expressed their frustration with the monopoly of a small number of major platforms, which can have an impact on their ability to switch to possibly better and more ethical alternatives. This suggests a form of 'platform lock-in', in which content creators might get the feeling of being restricted by a single system that both facilitates and impedes their work.

A number of participants also characterised content creation as a meaningful form of self-expression in addition to being a job. Some people saw their work as profoundly empowering because it gave them a platform to explore and express their identities and sexualities. However, social stigma often moderated this feeling of empowerment, suggesting that sex work, even in digital forms, is not widely accepted into society.

Participants have also discussed the importance of having a community, both with fans and other digital content creators. On one hand, connections within the industry can provide emotional and psychological support and the sharing of resources. On the other hand, it has been pointed out that, for some people, building a connection with subscribers was important. This is a unique aspect of digital sex work, where interactions can be both an emotional and financial practice, and this is reflected in the dual component of building communities and connections in this environment.

Additionally, participants also frequently emphasised the risky and precarious nature of their work. A sense of instability can often be an addition to unstable income, a lack of general protection, the risk of content theft or leakage, and the reliance on platforms. Another ongoing issue is the social stigma associated with sex work, which can often have an impact on the well-being and sense of security of creators. Additionally, some participants talked about the psychological effects of being a target of harassment, while others emphasised the absence of universal safety standards.

It is also important to take into consideration that in the case of the participant with chronic conditions, in addition to being financially stable, this kind of work can give people a sense of empowerment because it offers a level of independence and inclusivity that are uncommon in traditional work environments. This particular participant's story demonstrates the wider potential of digital labour to close gaps in the traditional labour market by

demonstrating how platform-based, independent content creation can be a more accessible employment option for people dealing with chronic illness or disability.

4.2.1. Comparison with Existing Literature

Some of these main themes and findings are in common with other previous research. For example, when it comes to autonomy and control, digital platforms allow for greater autonomy and flexibility and enable people to establish their own boundaries and schedules, as emphasised by Duffy (2017). In digital sex work, where creators can have complete control over their interactions and content, autonomy proves to be very important. Nonetheless, this autonomy is complex as some creators decide to work with agencies to get support with marketing and content moderation, but doing so often results in lower earnings and less personal agency. This compromise shows the difficult choices digital content creators have to make in order to keep a balance between their independence and the realities of operating a sustainable business.

Studies on freelance and gig work have shown that financial motivation is also a common driver in digital and platform work (e.g. Perera et al., 2024; Darmawan, 2021). The possibility of large profits, price control, and several revenue streams are the main factors that make it appealing when it comes to financial incentives. However, this research also highlights the vulnerabilities that can come with digital sex work. Creators' revenue can be greatly impacted by platform fees and extra expenses related to external agencies. The absence of traditional employment benefits and protections contributes to this financial precarity, and this is a concern that is also supported by more extensive research on the gig and platform economies.

In addition, some other points raised by participants are concerning platform affordances. Affordances in digital and independent work were already highlighted in previous research (e.g. Meijerink et al., 2021) as an appeal for this type of work, as content control and personal branding can be made easier by these platform affordances. Nevertheless, because of a phenomenon such as 'platform lock-in', which is caused by the dominance of a small number of major platforms, creators also find themselves unable to move to more suitable and ethical alternatives. This reliance on particular platforms highlights some limitations in the digital sex work economy, where creators have to balance the advantages and disadvantages of various platforms.

Moreover, participants in this study frequently see their work as a means of empowerment and self-expression, which is in common with previous research regarding independent work (e.g. Weber et al., 2021; Svejenova et al., 2010). Research on independent work, which also acknowledges the possibility of personal empowerment, provides support to this viewpoint. However, the stigma associated with sex work in society

can have a damaging impact on this sense of empowerment and result in challenges and difficulties for content creators.

Additionally, the importance of community, both among creators and their subscribers, is another recurrent theme. This is also reflected in earlier research regarding the relational and emotional aspects of digital sex work. For example, Young and Wiedenfeld (2022) highlighted the affective needs and dynamics between creators and their audiences, emphasising the importance of emotional labour. In addition, the importance of emotional connection and community building is also a key element of platform work, which has also been previously highlighted by Zimmer and Scheibe (2019).

Lastly, participants regularly pointed out the precarious nature of their job, pointing especially to risks such as harassment, content theft, inconsistent income, and a lack of legal protections. These worries generally align with research on digital and platform-mediated work. A work environment full of possible risks and uncertainties can also be a result that can be attributed to the dependence on digital platforms.

In summary, the results of this study are generally consistent with previous research on independent and digital work, highlighting themes of autonomy, financial motivations, identity, community, platform dynamics, and precarity. Yet, especially in the context of OnlyFans, this study also offers nuanced insights into the ways in which these themes interact and appear in the real-life experiences of digital sex workers.

4.2.2. The Tension Between Independence and Precarity

The constant struggle between independence and precarity often characterises the experiences of digital content creators, and it has emerged as one of the major themes throughout the interviews. On one side, independence in content creation is seen as liberating due to the autonomy and control it provides. Participants have talked about how having autonomy over their own work, boundaries, and creativity gave them a sense of autonomy and ownership that is often uncommon in traditional work environments. From a financial point of view, the ability to generate significant revenue, often more than in previous employments, was viewed as a major benefit, especially when creators have complete control over pricing and revenue.

Nonetheless, it is important to keep in mind that there is a great deal of insecurity associated with this freedom. Profits can often still be unpredictable, reliant on audience engagement, and linked to platform fees (like in the case of OnlyFans' 20% cut). In a similar way, their work is often accompanied by social stigma and no legal protection, even though many creators saw their work as emotionally and personally empowering. This shows how people often have to deal with the risks, instability, and discrimination on their own in a precarious environment, which is created by the same circumstances that allow for

empowerment. This dichotomy illustrates the complex reality of platform-mediated work where independence and vulnerability are often linked.

4.2.3. The Role of Platform Economy

The environment in which digital sex work is created and consumed is significantly shaped by the platform economy. In addition to the mediation of financial transactions, platforms like OnlyFans also have influence over notions as identity and labour. Platforms can provide a degree of autonomy and visibility that is extremely important for digital content creators by allowing access to markets and affordances such as subscription models, paywalls, and direct messaging.

Nevertheless, these digital infrastructures are often not neutral. Platforms often impose limitations that are determined by the platform itself, even as they create new opportunities for financial and creative independence. The precarity that comes with their dependence on a single platform was highlighted by the participants, especially in relation to unexpected policy changes, like OnlyFans' proposal to ban sexually explicit content in 2021. These changes bring to light ethical issues concerning accountability, transparency, and how much content creators have a say in a system that controls their work.

4.2.4. Implications for Policies and Workers' Protections

This study's conclusions highlight the urgent need for more regulatory structures that acknowledge and protect the rights of digital content creators, especially those working in sexually explicit environments. Even though platforms like OnlyFans are becoming more popular, sex work can still be found to be ignored when it comes to the discussion of labour policies. This exclusion can often lead to vulnerabilities, including the lack of standardised health measures and insufficient safety precautions. The precarity of their jobs was frequently mentioned by participants, who also mentioned how the stigma that comes with their profession, lack of legal protections, and unpredictable income can often have an impact on their emotional and financial stability.

Policies that deal with these systemic problems, such as safety standards, anti-discrimination, and universal protections that do not exclude digital sex workers, are clearly needed. In addition, participants pointed out how addressing misinformation and stigmas could improve societal understanding while also improving the well-being of the people working in the industry, which also highlighted an urgent need for the education of the public. Ultimately, for the platform economy to be more ethical, less harmful, and more autonomous, policies need to be inclusive and nuanced, taking into account the experiences of digital sex workers and content creators.

5. **Conclusion**

The purpose of this thesis was to investigate the reasons why people would decide to opt for platforms such as OnlyFans when it comes to independent digital sex work. The research question at the centre of this is: *what drives digital sex workers to choose an independent business model?* The goal was to gain a better understanding of the individual experiences, values, and decision-making processes of independent content creators working within the platform economy. The study aimed to put a spotlight on the numerous and different factors, from platform affordances and personal empowerment to financial incentives and experiences of risk, that can have an influence on people's decision to enter and participate into this field of work by focusing on a group that is often underrepresented in both academic and policy discussions. This study wants to challenge reductive narratives and highlights the independence of workers in a wider context shaped by using qualitative interviews and thematic analysis to provide a more nuanced and accurate representation of independent digital sex work.

Additionally, this study wants to provide insightful information about lived experiences by elevating the voices of independent digital content creators and sex workers. Through an analysis of the reasons people engage in platform-based work, it becomes clear that agency and autonomy are actively negotiated in a delicate and complex balance. The results show that motivations are often complex and nuanced, influenced by larger issues, like stigma, platform dependency, and lack of general protection, including the need for empowerment, self-expression, the desire for financial independence, and flexibility. By doing this, this study wants to call for more inclusive and nuanced approaches and to challenge prevailing ideas about sex work by reframing it as an entrepreneurial form of labour within the platform economy.

Nonetheless, it is important to recognise a number of limitations despite the fact that this study offers valuable insights into the driving factors behind independent digital sex work. First, the study's findings and results may not be as broadly relevant as they could be due to the small sample size. Additionally, the fact that the participants were self-selected might raise the possibility of self-selection bias, as those who volunteered may already be more comfortable discussing and talking about their work or may represent a demographic who has more positive and empowering experiences. Second, the conclusions may be context-specific and might not properly represent the range of experiences found on different digital platforms that engage with digital sex work and content creation, due to the fact that OnlyFans was the only platform that was taken into consideration. Finally, as the participants were limited to people who spoke English and were mainly from Western countries, the study's cultural and geographical reach was quite constrained. Because of this, the results might not accurately represent the experiences of digital content creators in

other areas and environments. In addition to that, the positionality of the researcher, a white cisgender woman living in the Netherlands, may also be a limitation of this study. The positional perspective might have an impact on how participants' narratives are interpreted and framed, especially in an environment and a field of study full of complexities. Despite reflexive methods being used throughout the research, it is important to recognise that the researcher's identity, cultural background, and relative positional privilege might have an influence on the interview dynamics and thematic data interpretation. Furthermore, this limitation also emphasises how important it is to critically take into consideration and examine the power dynamics that can be present in qualitative research and how more diverse voices, especially those from the sex work community, must be included in the design, analysis, and representations in studies.

Therefore, a number of recommendations are suggested for further research, by building on the conclusions and limitations of the current study. Firstly, a more comprehensive understanding of how a variety of technological affordances, platform cultures, and monetisation models might influence the experiences and motivations of creators could be done by comparative research across multiple platforms, such as Fansly and ManyVids, or other newer subscription-based platforms. These kinds of comparisons could also show how much a specific platform's governance and interface affect the decisions of content creators. Secondly, longitudinal research would provide important information about how motivations might change over time, especially as creators get more experience, face different difficulties, and adjust to new situations. Monitoring these changes might help assess important points in the professional development of independent content creators and the long-term sustainability of this work. Lastly, future studies should aim for greater inclusivity. This can be done by including the experiences and points of view of non-Western, gender diverse, and disabled creators. Despite the fact that these voices are still under-represented in the current academic literature, they can provide important insights into how experiences of visibility, empowerment, precarity, and autonomy are shaped by intersectional identities in the context of digital sex work. A more nuanced and equal understanding of independent digital sex work would be ensured by broadening the demographic and geographical scopes of the research, which is especially important in a globalised and increasingly platform-mediated world and economy.

The results and conclusions of this thesis show how independent digital sex work blurs traditional ideas that are frequently used to define labour and identities, including dichotomies such as empowerment versus exploitation, independence versus necessity, and work versus self-expression. The experiences shared by the participants show how difficult it is to classify digital sex work under conventional labour frameworks. Instead, it functions as the intersection of economic independence, individual liberty, and social and

cultural marginalisation, unveiling a complex and nuanced type of labour that is both creative and restrictive, entrepreneurial and vulnerable. It is becoming more and more crucial to consider digital sex work as a valid form of labour as digital platforms continue to change and reshape the nature of work and labour. The complex details of this field require ongoing research that is nuanced and mindful of the lived experiences of those working in it. Similarly, policy frameworks need to change in order to take into account the unique requirements that people in these online environments need. Lastly, removing the stigma that still exists around sex work requires a substantial change in public discourse that goes beyond moralistic evaluations and towards a more knowledgeable and informed understanding.

The way that labour, identity, and value are negotiated within the platform economy is changing and evolving, and independent digital sex work and content creation are a prime example of this. Recognising its validity and complexity is important for an equitable society as well as for academic integrity.

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Appendix

Table 1: Overview of participants

Participant	Age Range	Location	Activity Status + Years of Experience
P1	18-23	Austria	Active - 1 year
P2	18-23	New Zealand	Active - 2+ years
P3	18-23	Canada	Active - 2+ years
P4	24-29	USA	Active - 5+ years
P5	36-40	the Netherlands	Active - 1 year
P6	30-35	the Netherlands	Active - 5+ years
P7	24-29	the Netherlands	Active - 5+ years

Table 2: Summary of the six emergent themes identified in the analysis of interviews

Theme	Definition	Example
Autonomy and Control	The extent to which digital content creators can make decisions on their own regarding workflow, content production, scheduling, revenues, and audience engagement.	"For me [independence], it's everything. Because I suffer from fibromyalgia, you know? So, there are some days that I'm like, I can't make it. I'm just going to lie in bed. And with the kind of work that I do, you know, since I'm my own boss, I can't just do it. Yeah, I don't have to explain myself to anyone."
Financial Incentives	Financial incentives that encourage independent content production by creators, especially on subscription-based platforms.	"Of course, revenue both for life and pursuing long-term wealth, is a big motivator for me as well."

Platform Affordances and Accessibility	Features and functionalities offered by digital platforms (such as OnlyFans) and the impact they have on how creators engage with their audience, produce content, and manage their business.	"Even though the site is more complicated to learn, there's a lot more features that are better for us."
Identity, Empowerment, and Visibility	The ways in which digital content creators improve their social and professional visibility, express their individuality, and acquire a sense of agency through the creation of content on digital platforms.	"I've turned it into a way to give myself some power back and defy a system that shames women for sexuality while objectifying them in the same breath. If I'm going to be treated this way regardless, then fine, but at least I am going to get paid for it."
Community and Social Connection	The emotional and relational aspects of digital sex work, in which content creators use their platforms to find and build relationships and a community with people.	"Once I have entered the industry, I realised that the great thing about this industry is the support system. The community is absolutely incredible. Everyone is always looking out for each other. It is just so impeccable. I really like that."
Navigating Precarity and Risks	The methods employed by digital content creators to manage the structural, social, and financial risks often associated with their work.	"I know that Only Fans isn't gonna work forever. I think it has an expiry date, at some point. This platform isn't working anymore. Not because of me or because of my team or because of my body, or I don't know. I think just because of social media, I think it's going down at some point."