

# Female empowerment through OnlyFans?

*A sociology of law analysis of tendencies and norms  
surrounding OnlyFans and the use of sex as a commodity  
in the digital realm*

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# Abstract

**Title:** Female empowerment through OnlyFans? A sociology of law analysis of tendencies and norms surrounding OnlyFans and the use of sex as a commodity in the digital realm

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A new digital platform launched in 2016, named OnlyFans, and on this platform people can create and subscribe to digital content. OnlyFans has gained a lot of media attention, because of the significant sums of money so-called content creators have accumulated through sharing content which can be described as sexual. In this thesis I look at how norms around sex as a commodity might be mediated by a digital platform such as OnlyFans. Through in-depth interviews with female content creators, I explore how OnlyFans is understood and utilized by some of its users. Previous literature has suggested that commercial sex has become mainstreamed in our contemporary western society, and that the digital realm presents a change in the general acceptability of sex as a commodity. From a postfeminist perspective, the empowerment of women may be promoted by the ideal of sexual agency. I argue that this ideal appears to be easier to play out in the digital realm, especially on a digital platform such as OnlyFans. From a Foucauldian perspective on power, I suggest that sex is commodified in a way which aligns with productive forces such as neoliberalism. A story of liberal women who take advantage of available technology thus meets the story of a neoliberal economy where disciplinary power dictates the way in which women are “allowed” to act as liberal subjects. From a critical perspective, this story could depict women as equally controlled and exploited as with previous forms of commercial sex, although through disciplinary power they make decisions which are believed to be empowering on an individual level. From a sociology of law perspective, this warrants the question of how law should relate to changes in norms. A norms perspective on law suggests that societal norms influence legal norms. However, in the case of norms around sex as a commodity on OnlyFans, the normalization of sex as a commodity may be considered promoted by a neoliberal context. In other words, if norms around sex as a commodity are changing in favor of neoliberal and postfeminist ideals, the development of a platform such as OnlyFans can be said to fit into this structure.



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Harstad, September 2022

Monja Halvorsen



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# 1.0 Introduction

A new digital platform launched in 2016, named OnlyFans, and on this platform people can create or subscribe to digital content (Ryan, 2019). In popular media, OnlyFans has gained a reputation as a controversial platform, based on its growing number of users who share digital content such as photos and videos containing nudity, semi-nudity and in general pictures and videos containing sexual postures and posing, in exchange for substantial sums of money. The controversy around OnlyFans has been brought up in various media outlets both in Norway and internationally, with headlines describing people's experiences with OnlyFans as either a story of success or misfortune. Accounts of the platform has appeared in documentaries such as "Porno 2022", a Norwegian documentary series that explores the so-called revolution of pornography (NRK, 2022), a British documentary named "How to make it on OnlyFans" (Baker, 2021), and an American made documentary called "OnlyFans: Selling sexy" (ABC News, 2021), to name a few. The topic of OnlyFans was also discussed on the popular Norwegian live debate program "Debatten" in September 2021 (NRK, 2021).

In short, the digital platform OnlyFans may be representative of a new type of commercial sex, which has been described as "Internet-mediated exchange of sexual commodities and/or services" (Jones, 2015: 560). Users of OnlyFans can create digital content, and profit directly from sharing it to subscribers of their profile, hence being referred to as "content creators". While scholars for a long time have been interested in the study of sexual commodities, and sex work in particular, the Internet is said to have reshaped the structure and organization of it in a way which presents a new set of questions for scholarly inquiry (Jones, 2015).

In this thesis I will look at how norms around sex as a commodity may be mediated and influenced by the digital realm. The purpose of this thesis is to gain insights into the rise of OnlyFans, and better understand how this digital platform can be seen as an expression of current trends in our western contemporary society. As argued in relation to all technological developments, technology can just as easily diminish our liberty as it can enhance it (Brownsword, 2017). By examining how content creators relate to the idea of using sex as a commodity, and how they experience this in relation to a digital platform, one may get a better understanding of what OnlyFans represents in terms of new technological developments.

Commercial sex is not an unfamiliar topic of political debate and is often made subject to various forms of legal regulations which may serve different functions (e.g. Scoular, 2010). In general, commercial sex within the digital realm, is significantly less regulated than commercial sex in the physical realm. In this paper I will not go into detail about current laws regarding sex work, mostly because only a small portion of this is relevant for the case of OnlyFans. However, this apparent lack of regulation may be relevant for the current understanding of norms around sex as a commodity in the digital realm. From a sociology of law perspective, if norms around sex as a commodity are put in motion, this could be consequential for legal norms and the regulations of sex work.

As can be recognized from feminist debates, there is often one story about liberal women who use their sexuality to make money, and one story about how the market of sex and money exploits women's sexuality, making them sexual objects (eg. Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2014). OnlyFans has been said to revolutionize digital sex work as it creates "easy access and payment for those who want to broadcast sexual content (Ryan, 2019, p. 119). On OnlyFans, third-party agents and physical closeness, which traditionally characterizes sex work, is removed. As such, turning to a digital platform might make it safer and easier to engage in sexual commerce, as the sex worker is given increased power and agency in their work.

On the other hand, the development of new digital platforms such as OnlyFans might mediate norms around sex as a commodity on a societal level, as women who otherwise would not engage in sex work are attracted by the possibilities of the digital realm. Feminist theorists have looked at the value of sexual agency in our contemporary society and discussed the presence of a so-called postfeminist shift where more power is given to women (e.g. Banet-Weiser et al., 2020; Gill, 2008; Zaslow, 2009). By looking at the concept of power from a Foucauldian perspective, it can on the other hand be questioned who benefits from the development of a new digital platform such as OnlyFans. Foucault's saw power as a productive force, something which encourages certain acts over others, hence the term "disciplinary power" (Sandmo, 1999). From this perspective the development of a platform such as OnlyFans can be discussed in relation to structural forces of our society, such as the capitalistic market.

It has been argued that "sexuality has become a central component of late-capitalist consumer culture" (Bretners & Sanders, 2010: 45). Instead of sexual commerce being something that mostly exists within a space closed off from the rest of our society, it has arguably become

more visible and present in our everyday lives, which suggests that using sex as a commodity is increasingly normalized. While social media platforms such as Instagram or Facebook may profit from more subtle and indirect forms of sexual commerce, the organization of commercial sexual transactions on OnlyFans are explicit and direct in its sexual components.

Despite a great deal of media attention, there has not been conducted much scientific research on the topic of OnlyFans. In order to further understand this new digital phenomenon, there is arguably a need to examine the experiences of actors who use the platform, especially of those who create content on OnlyFans. Through empirical data based on interviews with female content creators, this thesis looks into how content creators might understand, reflect, and justify their choice to utilize their sexuality as a commodity in the digital realm.

## 1.1 Research questions

The main question of this thesis is the following:

### **I. How might a digital platform such as OnlyFans influence and mediate norms surrounding sex as a commodity?**

To further examine this, I will ask the following research questions:

- a) *How do content creators account for their participation on OnlyFans and how is the commodification of sex justified in this setting?*
- b) *To what extent and in what ways do content creators relate to issues of agency and empowerment?*
- c) *In what ways does the digital platform make commercial sex available in new ways and how do content creators utilize these possibilities?*

## 1.2 The digital platform OnlyFans

Before embarking upon the question of what OnlyFans is and how it may be experienced by some of its users, some notes on how the platform is designed and practically organized is needed. By searching for “OnlyFans” on google, the official website will pop up offering you to sign in or sign up, and anyone above the age of 18 can create a profile. Once you have created an account on OnlyFans you can add both payment cards in order to subscribe to other users, and/or bank account information in order to earn money if you wish to make

content which other people can subscribe to. As hinted by the name OnlyFans, only “fans” who are willing to pay for your content will be allowed access to it. In other words, the platform requires you to pay a subscription fee in order to get access to the content posted by those you wish to follow. As seen in illustration 1, a menu of options can be found on the left side of your homepage. Here you can find messages, subscriptions and an “add card” function.

Although there are many forms of content which people may be interested in, and willing to pay for, the main content of exchange on OnlyFans seems to be pictures and videos of bodies, usually with a sexual connotation. There are also people on OnlyFans who create content such as workout videos, cooking recipes, makeup tutorials, travel videos etc. However, as seen in Illustration 1, the presence of female bodies is evident through the suggestions of whose profiles to follow which automatically pop up as you log into the platform. While the suggested profiles are labeled “free”, the creators may charge you if you wish to access their more explicit content. Considering the stories told through popular media of female content creators who make a significantly large income through OnlyFans, nudity, semi-nudity and in general pictures and videos containing sexual postures and posing are undoubtedly popular among subscribers.

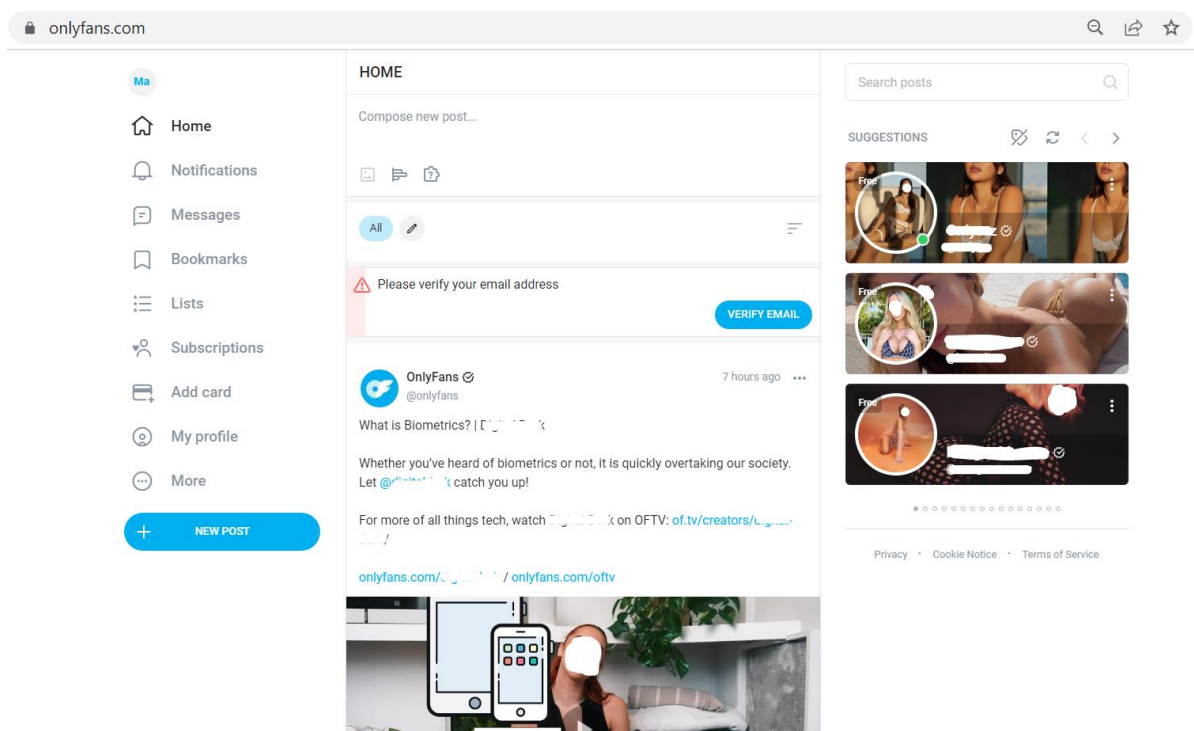


Illustration 1: Screenshot showing the design of the OnlyFans homepage.

### 1.2.1 A content delivery platform

Within the digital realm there is understood to be a diversity of spaces used to facilitate commercial sex. The digital platform OnlyFans can be categorized as a *content delivery platform* (Sanders, Scoular, Campbell, Pitcher, & Cunningham, 2018). By content delivery platform, Sanders et al. (2018) refers to “dedicated platforms that host and sell user-generated adult content online” (p. 38). They further explain how the sex worker create their own content, and how they are entirely in control of the content on their profile (Sanders et al., 2018, p. 38). The platform is simply a host that provides all the necessary technology and financial services so that clients can purchase content, while taking a percentage of each sale (p. 38). As stated on the help center of OnlyFans under “payout percentages”: “Creators receive 80% of the revenue on their earnings including subscriptions, paid messages and tips. The remaining 20% covers referral payments, payment processing, hosting, support, and all other services.”. In other words, the business model behind OnlyFans is built on taking a percentage of the profit made by individual content creators. This can be seen in contrast to making profit through for example advertisements, such as with Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok etc.

### 1.2.2 A new technology

*“New technologies offer human agents new tools, new ways of doing old things, and new things to do. With each new tool, there is a fresh option — and, on the face of it, with each option there is an enhancement of, or an extension to, human liberty. (...)”*  
(Brownsword, 2017: 41).

Depending on perspective, OnlyFans can represent a new tool, a new way of doing something old, and a new thing to do (Brownsword, 2017). If contrasted to typical social media platforms, like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok etc., OnlyFans can be thought to represent “a new thing”, as it allows people to directly profit from their own digital content. OnlyFans thus represent an opportunity for people to make money from content they possibly would post for free on their other social media platforms. It can also be considered “a new tool”, as it facilitates a space for women to take advantage of their sexuality for their own economic benefit. As we know, something valued as sex, and something valued as money, has been traded for a very long time. From this perspective, OnlyFans can also be said to represent “a new way of doing old things”.

### 1.3 Definitions

In this thesis I will be using the term “*sex as a commodity*”, to highlight the idea that sex is being made into a commodity to be traded on the OnlyFans platform. *Sex* in this context refers to something which appears to be sexual in its nature, may that be a picture of a nude body or a video of a sexual act. Sex being “commodified” therefore means something different than selling a sexual service in a direct sense. For instance, Bernstein (2007) described her concept of “bounded authenticity” (more on this in chapter 2.4) as “a particularly desirable and sought-after commodity” (p. 474). Similarly, the term “*commodity*” is considered useful in the context of OnlyFans, as it recognizes that when something is considered a commodity, it has the quality of being something desirable and sought-after, and it has been made available for purchase.

There are many ways to define a “*norm*”, and the term norm is used in this paper when discussing the use of sex as a commodity in the digital realm. Common to many sociological definitions of norms is the idea of norms as social expectations or rules regarding appropriate ways to act in a given situation, and as such norms may regulate our behavior. “Norms guide us, often without us even being aware of them” (Hydén, 2022: 2). Hydén and Svensson (2008) introduced their concept of norms as something which operates in-between law and society. As such they may lie behind legal rules or be something which may distort the legal regulation (Hydén & Svensson, 2008: 24). From this sociology of law perspective on norms, legal rules may guide us, but social norms that are internalized may be just as influential to our actions. Hydén and Svensson (2008) also points out how social norms can emerge over a long period of time and be considered a form of generalized best practice. In comparison to a rule, Rose and Valverde’s (1998) defines a norm as something which “appears – or claims – to emerge out of the very nature of that which is governed” (p. 544). This is also informative of how the concept of a norm will be used in this thesis. Rose and Valverde (1998) further understands norms as something which entails motivations to represent oneself in certain ways within certain practices (548). In chapter 4.1.2 I will take a further look at what a norms perspective on law may be, as it is considered useful for the analysis and discussion of OnlyFans.

The term *neoliberalism* will be used in this paper to discuss an economic logic which can be seen to influence our contemporary western society. In the book “Intimate labors”, Boris (2010) used the term neoliberalism when referring to “the rise of unfettered markets brought



by the deregulation of corporations and financial institutions, privatization and the concomitant decline of social welfare, and the imposition of free trade policies.” (p. 9). In simpler terms, neoliberalism can be understood as an ideology which promotes free markets, privatization, and minimal state intervention (Turner, 2008). By stressing “the importance of the market order as an indispensable mechanism for efficiently allocating resources and safeguarding individual freedom” (Turner, 2008: 4), neoliberalism can be understood to advocate individual responsibility over social welfare in terms of how our economy should be organized.

## 1.4 Thesis structure

In the following chapter I will be setting the scene in terms of previous research around the topic of OnlyFans and commercial sex. There has not yet been conducted a great body of research on OnlyFans specifically, however, one study by Ryan (2019) will be presented. The rest of the chapter will focus on literature which concerns commercial sex within the digital realm, as well as previous research which links commercial sex to broader trends of our contemporary western society.

In chapter 3 I will lay out all the methodological choices that have been made in regard to this project, explain the process of data collection, include some ethical considerations, and discuss the data quality and limitations of the study.

Chapter 4 presents the theoretical perspectives which the subsequent chapters will be informed by. This chapter begins by introducing perspectives within sociology of law which are applicable for the final discussion of how changes in norms around sex as a commodity can be understood in a sociology of law perspective. The rest of this chapter is divided into two parts. First, I will present Foucault’s theories on power and the subject, which will be used for discussion in the final chapter. Various scholars have used Foucauldian perspectives to look at sexual commerce, for instance by looking at the governmentality of commercial sex. Some of these theocratizations will also be presented in this part of the theory chapter. The next part presents feminist perspectives on sex as a commodity, specifically looking at postfeminist accounts of our contemporary western culture and the concept of sexual agency. Both parts of the theory chapter also include understandings of how neoliberalism might be included in a discussion of either governmentality or the postfeminist discourse.

In chapter 5, I will present some of the findings of this study. The experiences and understandings of the participants of the present study has been divided into four main themes: “normalizing sexuality”, “strategic work”, “sexual commerce in the digital realm”, and “personal boundaries”. Throughout this chapter I will analyze how these findings relate to feminist theorizations on sex as a commodity.

The final chapter 6 of this thesis draws Foucault into the discussion of OnlyFans, as I discuss how norms around sex as a commodity may be mediated by the digital realm. By looking at postfeminist and neoliberalism as influential to these norms, I will argue how the digital realm may act as a facilitator for a new type of commercial sex. I will then discuss how this may relate to legal norms in our contemporary western society and offer some concluding thoughts and suggestions for further research.

## 2.0 Setting the scene

### 2.1 Mainstreaming of commercial sex

Brents and Sanders (2010) analyzed the expansion of commercial sex in two different cities, Las Vegas and Leeds, through processes of “mainstreaming” in economic and social institutions. They argued that “cultural changes and neo-liberal policies and attitudes have enabled economic mainstreaming, whilst social ambivalence continues to provide the backdrop to a prolific and profitable global industry” (from abstract). By economic mainstreaming, they refer to how businesses, such as those within the sex industry, become more integrated with and similar to mainstream economic institutions, and so “sex-businesses look and act like majority, conventional, ordinary, normal businesses” (Brents & Sanders, 2010, p. 43). This goes hand in hand with so-called social mainstreaming, referring to cultural shifts in attitudes towards a greater acceptability of sexuality as a legitimate source of commerce (Brents & Sanders, 2010, pp. 43-44). And so, Brents and Sanders (2010) agree that “commercial sex has become mainstreamed as a direct consequence of broader social changes in the relative acceptability of bodies as commodities.” (p. 44).

In other words, they have argued that the sex industry seems to behave like any other industry, and norms surrounding sex as commerce seem to shift towards greater social acceptance (Brents & Sanders, 2010). The development of a digital platform such as OnlyFans, may be an example of such expansion and mainstreaming of commercial sex (e.g. Ryan, 2019). To untangle the question of which broader societal changes may have led to such an apparent change in the sex industry, Brents and Sanders (2010) looked to neoliberal economic policies. With policies privileging entrepreneurship, individual responsibility, and the free market, the opportunity to exploit changes in sexual values for economic gain, presents itself to the market (Brents & Sanders, 2010, p. 46). Brents and Sanders (2010) argued that “sexuality has become a central component of late-capitalist consumer culture” (p. 45).

### 2.2 Democratization of sex work in the digital age

When looking at literature and research involving the label “OnlyFans”, the book “Male sex work in the digital age – curated lives”, by Ryan (2019) stood out as one of the few scientific works specifically mentioning the digital platform OnlyFans. The book itself explores the

role of social media in the commercialization, and commodification, of the male body, and the chapter “Netporn and the Amateur Turn on OnlyFans” contains a closer examination of the OnlyFans platform. Even though the work of Ryan (2019) focuses on *male* sex workers, whom many engage in other forms of sex work taking place in the physical world as well as the digital, his conceptualization of the platform arguably presents valuable insights for this paper’s thesis as well.

“OnlyFans, launched in 2016, allows people to join as either creators or subscribers of content revolutionizing digital sex work by creating easy access and payment for those who want to broadcast sexual content.” (Ryan, 2019, p. 119). According to him, the arrival of “netporn”, referring to pornographies on online platforms and networks (Passonen 2010, in Ryan, 2019), has led to a democratization of the adult film industry (Ryan, 2019). By looking at OnlyFans from the perspective of established male sex workers, he argues how the removal of agents, producers and other intermediaries allows current creators of pornography to set the terms under which they work thus becoming “the principal beneficiaries of their work” (Ryan, 2019, p. 120). This argument was also supported by Sanders, Scoular, Campbell, Pitcher, and Cunningham (2018), who emphasized how “the internet appeared to play a large part in improving working practices, for example, in relation to accessing clients, control over working conditions, organization and independence, as well as safety for many” (p. 75).

The idea of more independence and ability to create one’s own sex work business, has in large been seen as an opportunity derived from increased access to digital technologies (Sanders et al., 2018, p. 77). In other words, the development of platforms such as OnlyFans, is thought to represent new and potentially better opportunities for those who themselves wish to trade in sexualized photos and videos for profit. In his analysis of male content creators on OnlyFans, Ryan (2019) also pointed at how neoliberal economic policies, where entrepreneurship is privileged and individual responsibility and the free market is highly valued, is significant when discussing the development of a digital platform such as OnlyFans.

If one is to discuss what the development of a digital platform such as OnlyFans represents, it seems important to distinguish between established sex workers, for instance with experience from traditional prostitution, and those who are relatively new to the sex industry. As argued by Ryan (2019), a transition into digital sex work, for people already engaged in physical sex

work (whatever the work may entail), is likely to bring about more physical safety and may provide a greater ability to be the sole beneficiary of one's work. However, as this paper will show, many women are drawn to the platform OnlyFans without ever having engaged in any traditional physical sex work. The willingness to use one's body and sex as a commodity in the digital world may therefore require a closer look into factors such as social norms around sex, work, and personal economic gain.

### 2.3 Digital lives – Camming

It can be argued that digital platforms have become a key feature of our contemporary western lives, at least for a majority of teenagers and young adults. As such, a growing body of research is looking at how our lives are construed into digital lives. Sanders et al. (2018) are among those who have looked at how digital technology interacts with what we know as sex work or sexual commerce. "The interaction between digital technologies and sex work is producing new forms of labor and variations in the processes of commercial sex, some of which are refined and adapted versions of what we already know about doing sex work, but others are entirely new, made possible by the existence of online sex markets such as webcamming." (Sanders et al., 2018).

Although there is currently limited research on OnlyFans and other digital platforms with the same structure of content sales, research on so-called "webcamming" has showed some of the features of moving sexual commerce to a digital platform in a highly interactive way without physical contact. As explained by Jones (2021) "Camming is different from traditional pornography because camming is interactive. Customers are purchasing a live and intimate encounter with a cam model(s), which is much different from buying or watching a pre-recorded, acted, and scripted pornographic film." (p. 240).

Research on Camming has shown that much time is spent on engaging with the customers online (Jones, 2021). This is arguably because, "in contemporary sex markets, clients desire an authentic sexual encounter that, while bound by the economic exchange, they also perceive as intimate" (Jones, 2021). In other words, camming appeals to what Bernstein (2010) named "bounded authenticity", a concept which arguably contradicts "the quick, impersonal 'sexual release' associated with the street-level sex trade". According to Bernstein (2010) the global reconstruction of capitalistic production and investment which has occurred since the 1970s, has been consequential for the way we think and relate to intimacy, sex and

money (p. 149). «The economic transformations of recent decades have restructured not only the social geography of sex work but also the subjective meanings that guide the experience from within» (Bernstein, 2010:152). In short, she argues that the supply and demand for commercial sex is influenced by capitalism. Although OnlyFans is not as interactive in time as Camming, there may be similar aspects of the work which require some of the same skills and intelligence.

## 2.4 Changing class profile of sex workers

In her work named “Sex work for the middle classes”, Bernstein (2007) looked at sexual commerce in relation to more generalized patterns of economic restructuring (p. 474). When asking why middle-class women are doing sex work, she looked at potential underlying connections between new classes of individuals participating in commercial sexual transactions, and a new “respectability” of sexual commerce. She argued that “given the gendered disparities of postindustrial economic life, the relatively high pay of the sex industry (compared to other service sector jobs) provides a compelling reason for some women from middle-class backgrounds to engage in sexual labour.” (Bernstein, 2007: 475).

As mentioned, Ryan’s (2019) research explored how OnlyFans enables male sex workers to strategically cultivate their digital lives into economic capital. According to Ryan (2019), one can point to a “changing class profile of both consumers and workers within the sex industry”, for instance through stories of university students and graduates who take work in some part of the sex industry (Ryan, 2019). This is consequently thought to challenge a dominant narrative of homelessness or drugs within the industry (Ibid.). Brents and Sanders (2010) also argued that “Media increasingly highlights the growth of both middle-class consumers and workers in adult markets, and with that a subtle shift in the perceived respectability of those involved in the industry” (p. 43). As such, it has been argued that a large number of newcomers are entering a segment of the sex industry, particularly that which occurs in the digital arena, which in turn has led to a certain redefining of the traditional terms associated with the sex industry (Ryan, 2019).

## 2.5 The power of stigma in commercial sex

Research on stigma within the context of commercial sex, has looked at how broader structural processes of exclusion, marginalization and discrimination are mediated by the contribution of stigma (Bjønness, Nencel, & Skilbrei, 2021). Stigma can be defined as “a

socially constructed, context-specific experience of Othering that devalues one's identity, social contributions and potentiality in ways that limit how one can interact within one's world of socio-structural relationships." (Bowen & Bungay, 2016: 187). Research has shown that women who sell sex tend to create symbolic boundaries between themselves and other women in order to distance themselves from a perceived stigmatized identity (Bjønness et al., 2021). In relation to sex as a commodity on OnlyFans, the idea of stigma can be interesting in terms of how its presence may be mediated by the digital realm.

While stigma is experienced on an individual level, scholars have also considered stigma as relational and attached with power (Bjønness et al., 2021). Link and Phelan (2001) looked at stigma as a social process which is embedded in relations of power, determined by dominant groups and their ideals. "Stigma is entirely dependent on social, economic, and political power - it takes power to stigmatize" (Link & Phelan, 2001: 375). Similarly, Bjønness et al. (2021), discussed how people may experience sex work very differently based on stigma and its relation to time, place, context and power relations.

Bjønness et al. (2021), argued that women who sell sex find themselves in a predicament, because the autonomy that is an integral part of the late modern respectable self, is difficult to achieve when being in a continuous relation to sex-clients, which is associated with power inequality and exploitation in a Scandinavian context. To be seen as someone who is coerced and exploited, and unable to control one's own life and fortune does in other words not fit into the contemporary ideals of the modern self (Ibid.). Bjønness et al. (2021) consequently argued that side by side with a dominant idea that no one would choose a life in prostitution, the contemporary neoliberal emphasis on individual choice and responsibility, creates an ambivalence and stigmatization towards women who sell sex. As will be questioned, the aim of respectability over stigma, when using sex as a commodity, may be different in the context of OnlyFans as a digital platform.

## 2.6 Possible benefits of the digital realm

When discussing the development of sex work in a digital era, Jones (2015) pointed to some of the benefits of digital sex work, which can help explain why more newcomers are drawn to it. The increase in physical safety, as Ryan (2019) also mentioned in his OnlyFans research, is thought of as an essential benefit. Additionally, "online sex work has led to better wages because the Internet allows prostitutes to more effectively recruit high-end desirable

clientele” (Jones, 2015). Although OnlyFans is a platform where planning of physical sex work outside the digital platform is prohibited, the knowledge that sex work online may lead to better wages still seems relevant. From this perspective the digital world is argued to represent a greater accessibility to customers of various economic classes, because without the necessity for physical closeness, a much larger market of potential customers is accessible through one’s phone or computer.

Sanders et al. (2018) also argued that people may make cost-benefit decisions to work in the sex industry (p. 70). For instance, if there is a possibility to work fewer hours for higher earnings, one may choose to fit sex work in around other commitments, such as study or another job (Sanders et al., 2018). In other words, flexible and shorter work hours, were seen as motivational factors for entering into digital sex work. “The opportunities provided by digital technologies for sex workers mean that money can be made from their bodies in absentia.” (Sanders et al., 2018, p. 158). By this, Sanders et al. (2018) referred to the possibility for online sex workers to make cash by selling sexualized content, which requires “little physical input other than the initial performance” (p. 158). In other words, the ability to make money from selling digital content means you do not have to be present at the time of the purchase, hence the phrase “in absentia”, meaning in absence of, or while not present. Although Sanders et al. (2018) does not mention OnlyFans in this regard, the selling of sexualized content is exactly what the OnlyFans platform specializes in.

Another aspect of the digital which Sanders et al. (2018) believes to be beneficial, is the ability to manage one’s presentation of self. “Some of the labor processes around the management of the identity and the presentation of the self are simply enhanced because of the online terrain: controlling images, switching profile photos; enticing customers by refreshing pages with new images and description is now all part of the everyday management of the online identity.” (p. 157). When discussing sexual commerce within the digital realm, the increased ability to manage how one is presented online compared to offline, may also be considered a beneficial feature of the digital which is transferable to OnlyFans.



## 3.0 Methodology

In this chapter I will lay out the methodological choices that were made in relation to this project. I will start by discussing the deliberative ones, such as the qualitative design and use of interviews as the chosen form of data collection. The process of recruitment and scope of the project can be seen as a mixture of deliberative choice in accordance with the thesis and focus of the project, but also choices resulting from limitations to the study. This will be laid out in the following part of the chapter as I describe how the in-depth interviews were conducted and reflect on my role as a researcher. Lastly, I will explain the strategy and process of data analysis, before bringing up some ethical considerations and limitations of the study.

### 3.1 Qualitative approach

Since the goal of this project has been to thoroughly examine the experiences of female content creators on OnlyFans, a qualitative research method was considered the best methodological choice. According to Hennink, Hutter, and Bailey (2020), qualitative research “allows you to identify issues from the perspective of the study participants and understand the meanings and interpretations that they give to behavior, events or objects” (p. 10). In order to understand the appeal of a digital platform such as OnlyFans, it can be argued that exploring the ways in which people relate to the platform, interpret, and experience themselves in relation to it, provides valuable data for further analysis.

Tjora (2018), explains how the qualitative method usually is found within an interpretive paradigm, as it focuses on the experiences and construction of meaning by the informants. Working within such an interpretive paradigm, the main goal of this project is not to conclude with any moral lessons or views concerning those who use OnlyFans. Rather it is to look at the ways in which OnlyFans is understood and experienced by some of the actors involved, in order to get a better understanding of how the platform may fit into societal structures at large, and specifically the role of the digital in mediating norms around sex as a commodity. Exploring the topic of OnlyFans through the lens of “insider informants”, may therefore fit well into the interpretive paradigm, as the construction of meaning at this micro level becomes the focal point for further discussion on societal development.

### 3.1.1 In-depth interviews

The preferred method of data collection for gathering insight into the world of OnlyFans, was in-depth interviews. Hennink et al. (2020) describes an in-depth interview as “a conversation with a purpose”, and by this they refer to the goal of gaining insight into a certain issue using a semi-structured interview guide, while seeking to capture individual voices and stories (p. 116-117). Considering how easy it is to develop opinions about controversial platforms such as OnlyFans, I will argue that in-depth interviews of the “main actors” on the platform, the content creators, may provide important insight into what makes it an attractive platform.

As qualitative research questions are said to be interpretive in nature (Hennink et al., 2020), the focus has been on understanding the women’s own perspectives and views. By asking open ended questions I wanted the informants to open up and reflect on their own experiences, feelings, and understandings of OnlyFans. The type of information gathered from this type of interview was then used to grasp the different narratives, subjectivities, and contexts, which results from the interviewees’ lived experience (Wengraf, 2001 in Hennink et al., 2020). For instance, by asking the informants to tell the story of how they got into using OnlyFans, insights were provided into what aspects of the platform were considered attractive, which in turn can tell us something about how OnlyFans is understood in relation to norms around sex as a commodity.

## 3.2 Selection and recruitment

### 3.2.1 Defining the selection

Before getting into how the recruitment process proceeded, some selection criteria and limiting notions should be clarified. Firstly, it is relevant to both point out how pictures and videos of sexualized bodies are not the only content one can subscribe to on OnlyFans, and that those who do sell this type of content are not just women (e.g. Ryan 2019). However, the purpose of this project has been to specifically look at the organizational aspects of young women who use sexualized content of themselves for its economic exchange value. As mentioned, OnlyFans has developed into a platform where the main body of content is that of sexualized female bodies, traded through subscriptions by the women themselves, and directed at a male audience and their desire to purchase said subscriptions. This, however, clearly paints a highly simplified and heteronormative picture of the platform. As within any

market or institution, there is variation, but for the purpose of exploring what is arguably the main system of exchange on OnlyFans, it is nevertheless useful to make such simplifications in order to examine the main development of the platform.

### 3.2.3 The recruitment process

The first obstacle of the recruitment process concerned finding OnlyFans content creators to contact. The platform itself does not exhibit any lists of current content creators or users, which means it is hard to find content creators on OnlyFans without already knowing what username to search for. You also have to pay the subscription fee in order to get access to the content of a profile and be able to contact a creator. (No payments were made in favor of this project.) However, many OnlyFans creators promote themselves and their OnlyFans profile on their other social media platforms. Although there are differing regulations in terms of where and how OnlyFans creators are allowed to promote themselves, I found that many add a link to their various other platforms on sites such as Instagram. People also seem more likely to use their real, full name on Instagram, which means it was easier to locate their profile there.

The first strategy of recruitment therefore became to search for people on Instagram, whose name appeared in popular media, and contact them there through a direct message. Additionally, I received a few names and Instagram profiles from personal acquaintances, who either suggested I contact the content creators myself, or who made the initial contact on my behalf. All the messages were sent through direct messages on Instagram and contained a simple description of the project, and a short explanation as to why the person was contacted, for example because the person had appeared in the media for their role as an OnlyFans content creator, or because their name or profile had been given by a shared acquaintance. The message was concluded with a request for an interview, and a mention that more information about the project would be provided.

Unfortunately, very few responded. About thirty young women were contacted on Instagram, and only a few of them answered the message. In hindsight it has become known that popular OnlyFans content creators tend to get piles of messages by their so-called “fans” on their other social media platforms such as Instagram, which may indicate that the interview requests got lost in the crowd. Even though some women answered positively to the initial message, most of the conversations ended quickly as they simply quit answering.

As the media's angle on OnlyFans generally has been rather critical, a point was made to emphasize the exploratory and sensible nature of this academic research, as to not scare any potential informants away. Assuming the messages were relatively straightforward, unintrusive and informative, the idea of spending time on an interview only "to be nice" may also have affected their willingness to pursue the request.

Because of the difficulties in recruiting informants, this part of the project took longer than expected. Only one of the creators who were contacted on Instagram ended up agreeing to an interview. Fortunately, this informant could direct me to other OnlyFans creators by the end of the interview, and the ball began rolling. Through the method of "snowball sampling" (e.g. Hennink et al., 2020), two more interviews were booked. As Hennink et al. (2020) explains, snowball sampling is a good method for accessing a relatively hidden study population, however, with snowball sampling there is a risk that all informants may come from the same social network and have similar characteristics (p. 104). In this case, the interviewees knew each other as OnlyFans content creators who would share guiding tips for how to use the platform.

Those who did respond, were asked to give out their email address in order to receive an informational letter and form of consent regarding the project and what it would entail for them to participate as interviewees.

After realizing how difficult it was to recruit OnlyFans informants, I decided to expand the recruitment criteria by contacting non-norwegian OnlyFans content creators. This was done through one of my own social media accounts, as I posted an "Instagram story" asking for friends and acquaintances to get me in touch with any girl using OnlyFans. Through this relatively international network, I was directed to two girls, one in the US and one in Australia, none of whom I knew or had heard of previously. These girls were contacted in the same way as the other informants, through a message on Instagram. They both agreed to be interviewed, and so two more interviews were conducted and included in the study.

### 3.2.2 Who was recruited

This relatively lengthy recruitment process ended in a total of five interviews with female OnlyFans content creators. Three of them were Norwegian nationals, one from the United States and one from Australia. Although my initial preference was to recruit Norwegian informants in order to have a more homogeneous group of study participants, the challenges

of recruitment led to some adjustments. Although the informants were not limited to one nationality, potential differences in cultural background or other societal relations based on geographic location has not been given much attention in this project. As both of the two informants were living in what can also be described as “western countries”, or highly developed countries, not much attention was given to potential effects of their residencies. Based on the data analysis, not much, if any detectable differences in their stories or attitudes towards OnlyFans and their work, were noticeably traced back to this variable. However, it should be noted as a weakness of this study, that the study participants now represented a much larger population, making them an even smaller selection of this population.

The recruited informants were between the ages of 18 and 30. Differences in life experiences, especially experiences with adult life and work, likely influenced the informant’s perspectives on their own role as content creators. The youngest informant of only 18 years old may have seen OnlyFans as more of a hobby as she was not economically dependent on it while still living at home. The older informants on the other hand, may have felt more defined by their role on OnlyFans, considering the tendency of people to identify themselves with what they do for a living.

Even though I will argue that the conducted interviews provided much depth and new understanding to the phenomenon of OnlyFans, the goal of data saturation was unfortunately not met to a satisfying degree. Saturation meaning “the point in data collection when no more new issues emerge, data begin to repeat with no added understanding of the issues, so that further data collection becomes redundant” (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2020:330). During the recruitment process it quickly became clear that this goal would be hard to reach, as OnlyFans content creators were reluctant to line up for interviews.

### 3.3 Supplementary expert interview

Due to the difficulties in finding OnlyFans informants who were willing to be interviewed, other options for data collection were considered. As OnlyFans can be located in the realm of sexual commerce, a professor with extensive knowledge and research experience on the subject was contacted. May-Len Skilbrei, who has a doctorate in sociology from the University of Oslo, and has studied law and criminology, agreed to an interview to discuss the topic of OnlyFans. The interview was conducted in a private room at the university.

Based on her research and knowledge of the field of commercial sex, she was recruited as a supplementary interviewee to provide further nuance to the data collected through the OnlyFans informants' interviews. As explained by Brinkmann and Kvale (2018), expert interviews, or "elite interviews", are with persons who are leaders or experts in a community. The interview was conducted after the first three interviews with OnlyFans content creators, and after having done a tentative analysis of early-stage findings from the first interview. In addition to discussing general issues regarding the platform, I therefore presented some preliminary findings, which we discussed and reflected on. As I was also familiar with some of her work, and the technical language of the field, we were able to have an interesting conversation about the topic at hand (Brinkmann & Kvale).

The interview had an open structure, with a shared reflection based on my tentative findings and her research experience. The main goal of the interview was to look at parallels between the organizational structure of OnlyFans, and other forms of commercial sex from an experienced researcher's point of view. Although Skilbrei has not done any research herself on OnlyFans specifically, she has been recruited by public media to discuss whether the trade of sexualized content on OnlyFans is covered by current legislation. Her answer to this question was also brought up for discussion in the interview. The professor's voice will be brought in to comment on certain findings from the main source of data, the interviews with the OnlyFans content creators. As such, the interview contributes by shedding additional light on the OnlyFans phenomenon.

## 3.4 The in-depth interviews

### 3.4.1 Interview guide

As mentioned, the methodic choice of in-depth interviews was aimed at gaining insight into the topic in question by seeking individual voices and stories (Hennink et al., 2020). For this purpose, I prepared a semi-structured interview guide for the main interviews with the OnlyFans content creators (Appendix II). The first part of this interview guide contained some questions of background information about the informants, such as age and residency. There was also a question of work experience, and whether the informants were currently engaged in work or studies, besides profiting from OnlyFans. Already at this point some insights were gained as to whether they saw OnlyFans as a full-time occupation or something to make money from on the side.

The next part of the interviews contained questions of how long they had been using OnlyFans, how they got into it, and how they used it. To get further insights into how they saw their role on the platform and how they described their use of it, questions around their understanding of the “work” were pursued in the next part of the interview. Because the first informants were quick to compare OnlyFans to other social media platforms such as Instagram, questions of the difference between sharing content for free (on Instagram), and for profit (on OnlyFans), were brought up in the rest of the interviews.

Another part of the interview guide consisted of questions regarding their perception of OnlyFans and how they saw it as perceived by their community and the general society. On this topic I also wanted to know how their relation to feminist thinking were, as this was something I was interested in pursuing on a theoretical note. By presenting the informants with the question of what OnlyFans may mean for women in general, the informants were invited to reflect on what OnlyFans represents outside of themselves.

Another important area of questions concerned boundaries and prices on OnlyFans. By getting the informants to reflect on the particulars of their content, and how this was transferred into sales and profit, insight was gained into both organizational features of the platform, and how the informants experienced these transactions. A part of the interviews also looked into the relationship between content creators and their subscribers, where the informants would tell stories of their own experiences. Finally, the informants were asked some last questions of whether they would recommend OnlyFans to a friend, and how long they imagined continue using it.

In general, the prepared interview guide would instruct the interviews, however, some questions were considered abundant as most of the informants had many stories to tell and tended to bring up interesting topics themselves. This was considered very fruitful to the goal of the data collection, as it gave insight into their experiences with the platform.

### 3.4.2 The interviews

All the interviews were conducted digitally. This was mainly due to the informants' differing geographical locations, as well as preferences caused by Covid-19 restrictions for the informants who otherwise would be physically reachable. All but one interview occurred through a video conversation, which was suggested to all informants as the preferred form of interview. As mentioned by Howlett (2022), one of the most obvious challenges with data

collection through video conversations is the requirement of stable internet access and to a certain degree technological competency. For this group of informants, I will argue that video conversation was not an issue in this regard, as they all had good access and knowledge of the digital realm.

Many have written about pros and cons of digital video interviews in comparison to physical in-person interviews. Thunberg and Arnell (2021) argued that “the online option might affect what kind of information participants can take in and understand, what information the researcher will be able to capture, and the richness of the data.” (p. 6). Hellebust, Smith, Lundeberg, and Skilbrei (2021) found that although one may lose some of the sensory impressions that one gets in face-to-face interviews, digital interviews could also be experienced as more “intimate” as one gets each other’s faces quite close up. During the interviews of this study, a similar notion was experienced. Another benefit of the digital interview was that the informants appeared to be relatively relaxed and comfortable with the setting and their own surroundings. This could be because they were in their own homes, a familiar space, which could mean that they were more outspoken and personal in their answers (Hellebust et al., 2021).

Another beneficial aspect of the digital interview could be how it mediates the power imbalance between interviewer and interviewee (Thunberg & Arnell, 2021). As it was always a possibility that the interviewee could log off and disappear from the interview, they were more in control of their participation, which arguably made them more comfortable. Lastly, because this was an interview about a digital platform, and their experiences with OnlyFans and the digital realm, it arguably made sense to conduct the interview digitally as these were informants who were used to and comfortable with this realm.

One of the informants did not want to participate in an interview through a video conversation, and so the interview was conducted through sound only. As argued by (Hellebust et al., 2021), one loses a lot of the human contact by interviewing through the phone without video, such as facial expressions and body language. For instance, it could be harder to interpret what the informant meant by her statements. However, because the informant claimed she was uncomfortable with using video, a phone interview was the best option. As pointed out by Tjora (2018), interviews over the phone may allow a greater sense of anonymity, which could be beneficial in terms of getting the person to talk openly about sensitive topics. During the interview she seemed relaxed and had plenty to say about



OnlyFans, including how she felt about presenting herself on screen in the digital realm. She also opened up about why she did not feel comfortable with being interviewed through a video conversation, which in itself provided a useful piece of data which is discussed in chapter 5.3.3 “Impression management”.

With the permission of each informant, the interviews were sound recorded. At the beginning of each interview the nature of the project was explained, and the informants were asked if they consented to being interviewed and for the interview to be sound recorded. Before the interviews, the informants were also provided with an information letter about the project where it was stated that the interview preferably would be sound recorded. When the recordings were transcribed, any information which might identify the persons were removed in order to anonymize the informants.

### 3.4.3 Role of the researcher

In line with the interpretive approach as explained by Hennink et al. (2020), it should be acknowledged that the data collected in this project is influenced by subjective understandings, both on part of the study participants and myself in the role of a researcher. With the acknowledgement that we in many ways belong to the same social world, some reflections of my role as a researcher and its influence for the validity and quality of this project should be given attention (eg. Hennink et al., 2020). As a young woman in today’s contemporary western society, some of the experiences of the informants, and cultural ideals, which I have referred to as postfeminist (chapter 4.3.2), were recognizable on a personal level. Because identifying with study participants can lead to one losing a critical perspective on the knowledge that is acquired (Kvale, 2012), I aimed to be aware of my subjective opinions and perspectives, and remain as neutral as possible during the interviews and throughout the research. At the same time, being a young woman myself, in the same age group as the informants, arguably made it easier to establish trust with the informants, which arguably led to fruitful conversations about the platform.

During the interviews, effort was made to create an informal setting where the informant felt comfortable opening up, and I would argue that the combination of this effort, and my characteristics as a young woman led to the gathering of in-depth and insightful data. At the same time, the influence of my background, characteristics and emotions could also be considered a challenge in the process of gathering data.

As explained by A. Tjora (2012), similarities with study participants may result in one taking for granted certain experiences or views. As a researcher I therefore aimed to embrace a somewhat naïve position and let the informants themselves explain their ideas and bring in their own topics to the conversation (Tjora, 2012). The goal was to create a balance between an informal interview situation where the informants felt comfortable and opened up, while also being the one to direct the interview and take responsibility in establishing its frame.

The concept of “Verstehen”, as known from the sociology of Weber, and explained by Hennink et al. (2020), was emphasized and considered in this data collection process. In short, Verstehen refers to “understanding the life of the people whom you study from their own perspective, in their own context and describing this using their own words and concepts.” (Hennink et al., 2020: 17). In order to explore how the digital platform OnlyFans may mediate norms around sex as a commodity, I aimed to look for the subjective meanings that content creators attached to their experiences and views of the platform. In other words, to get an insider perspective and go into Verstehen.

## 3.5 The process of analysis

### 3.5.1 Transcribing and coding

Because the study participants did not all speak the same language, three interviews were conducted in Norwegian and two in English. All interviews were transcribed in the same language as was spoken during the interview. At this stage I wanted to preserve as much of the data as possible and therefore transcribed the interview in a detailed way, including any pauses, “thinking words” such as “um” “ehm”, and visual cues such as laughter. Tjora (2012) argued that it can be smart to include such details, as it may be significant in an analysis (p. 144).

Once the first three interviews had been transcribed, the process of coding the data began. I used the digital analysis software NVivo 12 for the initial coding of the data material and formulated what A. H. Tjora (2018: 179) called “tekstnære koder”, meaning words and expressions describing a section of data. Codes which reoccurred was understood to express the same theme and were gathered to a superior code. Through this gradual structuring of codes, I ended up with some main themes for the analysis which were considered relevant to

the thesis. By using a thematic analysis method I aimed to create order and identify connections within the data (Johannessen, Rafoss, & Rasmussen, 2018).

When the last two interviews were conducted, I followed the same process of coding the data, by adding statements into existing codes as well as creating new codes. At this stage I had a mix of English and Norwegian data and codes, which at times was confusing as it required extra attention while creating and building codes. If I had known that my last two interviews would be conducted in English, I likely would have created the initial codes in English as well.

While NVivo worked well for the purpose of coding data in the initial stage of analysis, the process was also transferred to pen and paper as I began categorizing the codes into larger themes. At this stage I translated all the codes into English. In this process of the analysis, I went back to each interview transcription to highlight relevant statements. For the final analysis, an effort was made to translate statements in a way which sustained the meaning and content of each statement. Mandal (2018) noted some potential issues with so-called single translation, where translating from a source language to a target language is fully dependent on the skills, competencies, and interpretation of only one translator (p. 2532). This could be seen as a limitation of this study. At the same time, it could be mentioned that the Norwegian informants would use many English words and expression when explaining their experiences, such as feeling like “A piece of meat”. Additionally, as the English language arguably dominates the internet, and is the main language of the OnlyFans platform, the vocabulary of the different informants contained a lot of common words which did not need translation, such as “content creator”, “subscribing”, “influencers” etc.

### 3.5.2 Analytical approach

As explained above, the process of analysis was mostly inductive, as I aimed to develop some general connections based on empirical findings (Tjora, 2018: 14). While the project has been empirically driven, theoretical perspectives has had a clear role throughout the project. This can be understood in line with an abductive approach, where one allows theories and perspectives to come into play at the beginning or during the research process (Tjora, 2018). Additionally, the project arguably came to life because of an “inductively driven curiosity” (Tjora, 2018: 9, my translation). Namely my personal curiosity and theoretical motivation to

examine the experiences of someone using the digital platform OnlyFans, and their sexuality as a commodity, based on an interest in societal developments.

As I approached the topic of OnlyFans from the field of sociology of law, the idea that a change in societal norms can affect a change in legal norms (eg. Mathiesen, 2001), was influential to questions that were pursued in the interviews. While the analysis in itself began with the empirical data, certain theoretical perspectives have formed the data, such as that of feminist perspectives. The decision to include Foucauldian perspectives to shed new light on the empirical findings was made during the analytical process. In the essence of full transparency, it is therefore important to point out how the phenomenon of OnlyFans could have been studied from a number of other perspectives.

Despite ending up with a relatively small number of interviews, the conducted interviews proved to be very fruitful and in-depth about the topic at hand. Many themes emerged, and I ended up structuring the analysis into four major themes, which focuses on different aspects of the experiences and stories of the informants (Chapter 5 “Analysis”).

### 3.6 Ethical considerations

During this project I actively made sure to follow the guidelines for research ethics in the social sciences and the humanities (NESH, 2021). These have been relevant for assessments throughout the project.

Before each interview, the participant was informed of the purpose and design of the project, and this was repeated at the beginning of each interview as the question of consent was brought up. They were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point without consequences, and that their participation in the project would be fully confidential (eg. Hennink et al., 2020). As mentioned, the data was anonymized during the process of transcribing, and I was the only one who had access to the protected research material. When registering the project with NSD (Norsk Samfunnsvitenskapelig Datatjeneste), the importance of following these types of ethical guidelines for research in terms of protecting the identity and privacy of informants was also made clear.

In order to further anonymize the informants, I have chosen to mix up their voices instead of referring to them by number or fictional names. This means that less attention is given to comparing their experiences and stories to each other, which may be considered a weakness

of the study. However, from an ethical perspective I would argue that it serves to further keep their identities confidential. As some of the informants know of each other, and/or have been located through the media, separating them could lead to unwarranted attempts to “figure out” who the voices belong to. The analysis discusses differences between their statements within the certain topics, and so a notion of how they also have different experiences with using OnlyFans is somewhat represented.

While the informants appeared relatively comfortable with discussing intimate matters of the body, sex, and money, there is arguably an emotional aspect of diving into these experiences in an in-depth interview, which I had to be aware of as a researcher and interviewer. Making sure the informants felt respected and listened to without any judgment or prejudices during the interview was important from an ethical perspective.

Important throughout the study, was also the acknowledgement that rather than concluding with any value loaded opinion about the use of OnlyFans, the goal has been to gain insight and explore how the platform fits into our contemporary western society. This exploratory nature of the project is important from an ethical perspective, as it means that I was not simply looking to confirm an hypothesis (eg. Nygaard, 2017). At the beginning of the project, it was unclear which direction I wanted to take the research, and the decision to include a critical Foucauldian perspective on power and subjection was made during the process of analysis, based on observed tensions within the empirical data. While the final discussion of this thesis can be said to shed new light on some of the empirical findings which is discussed in the analysis, I want to highlight how seeing the stories of the informants in a different perspective does invalidate them. It is rather meant as a way to interpret and understand the social world in which we all operate from a particular perspective.

### 3.7 Limitations

Some limitations of the study have already been discussed, such as the relatively small selection of participants. On this note it could be suggested that the content creators who agreed to be interviewed for this study represents a certain group who are confident and comfortable enough to speak about their experiences. The many content creators who rejected or ignored the invitation to be interviewed could potentially present different accounts of OnlyFans and how their experiences with the platform have been. In other words, if the content creators who were willing to be interviewed did so based on their perception of

having succeeded with their OnlyFans profile, they may not represent the large number of creators who have different experiences. The goal of generalization or transferability may thus be considered limited (eg. Tjora, 2018).

The deliberative choice to focus on women who use OnlyFans, both because this was the group who appeared to be the most present on the platform and because I wanted to explore how the digital platform related to gender from a theoretical perspective, may also have removed potential connections and understandings of the phenomena from being discovered. As mentioned this study generally looks at the concept of sex as a commodity on OnlyFans from a heteronormative perspective, as the focus lies on discussing how the female body is objectified for the desire of men (eg. Robinson, 2016). It is important to stress that this has been a deliberative choice made to simplify and go in-depth about a specific system of sexual and economic exchange which occurs on OnlyFans.

## 4.0 Theoretical perspectives

There are many ways into discussing a phenomenon such as OnlyFans, where something related to sex and the body is traded for profit within a digital arena. In this chapter I will be establishing the theoretical framework which informs my analysis and discussion of the digital platform OnlyFans, and the question of how the digital realm may influence and mediate norms around sex as a commodity. The chapter begins by broadly situating the chosen topic and thesis within the field of sociology of law, specifically with perspectives on structure and norms. While these perspectives are fundamental to this research, they will be further discussed in relation to the thesis in the final discussion chapter.

In order to discuss the topic of sexual commerce on OnlyFans from a structural perspective, I will then dive into the work of French philosopher Michel Foucault, specifically his work on disciplinary power, subjectivity, and governmentality. In this part of the chapter named “A Foucauldian perspective on power” I will also present theories by scholars who have used the terms and methodology of Foucault to discuss topics such as “the entrepreneurial self” and “the governmentality of commercial sex” (eg. Peters, 2001; Scoular, 2010). Foucault’s work arguably provides more of a methodological approach to analyzing power relations, than a theory of power (Sandmo, 1999). As such I aim to use his work as a foundational frame of thought and follow his example by analyzing how the work of OnlyFans content creators may relate to wider structures of power relations. I will be using Foucault in the “Discussion” chapter of this thesis, as a way to look at the findings made in this project from a different perspective. A structuralist perspective on power may be criticized for its lack of recognition towards people’s agency and free choice. However, as an analytic tool meant to analyze what shapes people’s actions, Foucault’s ideas can be used to address basic power structures which can help explain what affects the arguably controversial choices of my OnlyFans informants.

As I have decided to focus on women’s experiences with using sex as a commodity on OnlyFans, feminist perspectives and theories of normative influences which concerns the position of women in our society are considered useful. The next part of this chapter thus consists of feminist perspectives and conceptualizations, particularly postfeminist views on empowerment and sexual agency. Theories around female empowerment within a neoliberal framework are presented as they are considered relevant to a further discussion on how OnlyFans can be understood in relation to our contemporary western society. These feminist theorizations will be referred to in the analysis, as well as in the final discussion chapter.

## 4.1 Sociology of law – Structure and Norms

### 4.1.1 Structural perspective

According to Mathiesen (2001), one may speak of three general lines of questions for the wide field that is sociology of law: First, “In what ways, and how, does other societal relations affect the development of legal rules, decisions and institutions?”, second, “In what ways, and how, does legal rules, decisions and institutions affect other societal relations?”, and lastly, “to what degree is there an interaction between societal relations and legal rules, decisions and institutions?” (p. 37. My translations). By “societal relations” one may refer to any social interactions occurring between people within and between small groups, big organizations, comprehensive social divisions etc. In other words, society is something more than the mere sum of individuals living in a society (Mathiesen, 2001). According to Mathiesen (2001), these social interactions create more or less firm social structures, which are essentially created by individuals, as they continuously make choices and decisions. From this structural perspective, one could say that we are more or less compelled to make certain decisions as our options are formed by the structures, however the structures cannot be conceived of without the individual’s choices and decisions (Mathiesen, 2001).

### 4.1.2 Norms perspective

There are multiple perspectives to draw on when discussing how societal relations affect the development of legal rules, decisions and institutions. I will here look into one of them, the “norms perspective”. In short, this is the perspective that societal norms influence the development of the legal sphere (Mathiesen, 2001). According to (Hydén, 2002), the normative field or system is essential in society, and certain changes in norms contribute to change in legal norms. For instance, if norms around sexual commerce are understood to be in motion, based on technological developments and general norms around sexuality, this may consequently have an effect on legal norms. From a “norm perspective”, it is arguably interesting to study whether, and if so how, norms around commercial sex are in motion.

Hydén (2022) considers how “norms are often concealed or based on hidden premises that are expressed in the form of statements while containing an inherent expectation that a given action will follow.” (p. 94-95). In other words, people might not always be aware of the premises which underlie their actions. And so, by looking at statements and common



understandings within a certain area, the concept of norms can be helpful in order to detect motivational factors for why people do what they do in a given situation (Hydén, 2022). From a norms perspective, it can be argued that one should look into individual accounts of a social practice, such as OnlyFans, and see how individuals make sense of and explain their choices and decisions. “The concept of norms can be seen as the mediating link between what is and what ought to be, or to put it in social scientific terms, between the actor and the system.” (Hydén, 2022: 3).

#### 4.1.3 Interaction between legal rules and norms

Considering how legal rules, decisions and institutions affect other social relations, there are also multiple angles to look from. In general, one may speak of intended and unintended effects, although it may be difficult to clearly determine legal objectives (Mathiesen, 2001). In regard to commercial sex, such as prostitution, the intended effects of banning it, could for instance be preventive, as legal rules are meant to prevent people from a life in prostitution. Another intended effect could be to rid the street of prostitutes. As have been suggested (eg. Skilbrei & Holmström, 2016), unintended effects of a prostitution ban, can be that it becomes more dangerous to be a prostitute, as one’s access to health care or general safety measures become constricted by one’s status as an outlaw.

One may also speak of underlying social functions in relation to legal rules. If a society is considered “rid” of “unwanted” individuals by putting them in jail or prohibiting their practice, one may speak of a “renovation function” of the law (Mathiesen, 2001). If a certain group is being scrutinized through the legal lens, while others are being left alone, it can also be suggested that law has a “distractive function” (Ibid.). Considering formally established legal norms, these are made through choices, inevitably by individuals within a social structure. As suggested by Mathiesen (2001), various premises flow from the surroundings to the decision maker, however they may be distorted in the way they present themselves. This also means that legal decisions are influenced by moral norms or other normative influences from different areas of our social world.

## 4.2 Foucauldian perspective on power

### 4.2.1 A Foucault inspired sociology of law

Foucault's work is difficult to place within one category or academic field, and Foucault is said to have distanced himself from the categories others have attempted to fit him into (Ugelvik, 2013). In addition to the philosopher Foucault, one may speak of a Foucault inspired sociology, criminology, history science, etc. (Ibid.). Ugelvik (2013) argues that one may also speak of a Foucault inspired sociology of law. Indeed, Foucault's analyses of the presence of power, which will be further explored, are thought of as important contributions for the development of theory within sociology of law (Sand, 2012). Despite interpretations of Foucault as someone who argued against the status of law and the legal system, there are elements of Foucault's work which arguably shows significant attention to the role of law in contemporary western society (Ibid.).

As a critical perspective within sociology of law, the recognition that everything could be different may significantly be pointed out with Foucault's focus on the historical origins of categories of understanding and rationalities within jurisprudence (Ugelvik, 2013). For instance, how the changing norms of society impacts the development of law and legal norms, as well as vice versa (Mathiesen, 2001). Foucault does not sharply differentiate between legal systems and the wider social and cultural contexts in which law and justice is situated, which suggests that his ideas may be used to show how the legal system is always tied together with non-jurisdictional systems, logics and modes of power (Ugelvik, 2013). With the acknowledgement of an interchangeable world of legal systems and the social and cultural world, a Foucauldian perspective can be understood as helpful when looking at the historical significance of developments within all areas of our social reality.

### 4.2.2 Structuralism and Subjectivity

Structuralism and subjectivity are two aspects of Foucault's work, which are discussed by Ugelvik (2013) as central ideas of a Foucault inspired sociology of law. In short, structuralism refers to the attempt to explain the structure between the world and the representations of the world, which systematizes our impressions and makes them culturally apprehensible (Ugelvik, 2013). For Foucault, this structure does not exist as something a priori, meaning something static to be discovered as a transhistorical truth. Based on this

view, Foucault has been referred to as a poststructuralist (Ibid.). According to him, one has to analyze at the level of historic and cultural conditions in order to discover what is deemed “true” or “untrue” within specific historic and sociocultural contexts (Ugelvik, 2013: 434). From this (post)structural perspective, Foucault would claim that “jurisprudence is tied together with broader understandings of “truth”, which consequently affects jurisprudence’s perception of its area of responsibility and its “object” – thus our perception of legal subjects” (Ugelvik, 2013: 434, my translation).

Looking at the concept of a subject, Foucault’s insight is based on the work of Durkheim, who wanted to show how society’s structure is incorporated into people’s sense of identity and self (Ugelvik, 2013). In other words, the practical function of the structure for how people come to act in the world.

“The subject is understood as a product of the meeting between one individual and institutions, power relations and knowledge practices, which produce truth. To be a subject is to regard certain notions of oneself as true, to experience oneself in a certain way by having found certain forms of knowledge about one self.” (Ugelvik, 2013: 437).

An important aspect of Foucault’s work in this area is that the subject comes to be, as the individual is connected to and must relate to certain forms of power (Ugelvik, 2013). In this sense, although it may seem controversial (biased/critical) to include the concept of power to a conversation about OnlyFans, Foucault’s ideas of power may be beneficial as an analytical tool for understanding what underlying structures and processes of subjectification gives meaning to the platform.

#### 4.2.3 Disciplinary power

“...It [power] is a total structure of actions brought to bear upon possible actions; it incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult; in the extreme it constrains or forbids absolutely; it is nevertheless always a way of acting upon an acting subject or acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of action. A set of actions upon other actions.” (Foucault, 1982:789)

Foucault saw the nature of power as something different than the ability to achieve consensus, or the opportunity to use violence (Foucault, 1982). Instead of a power relation being described as mode of action where one person’s actions directly and immediately affect

or force another person's actions, Foucault describes power as the inevitable structuring of the field of actions (Foucault, 1982).

Foucault describes the emergence, or invention, of a new mechanism of power in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; "disciplinary power" (Foucault, 1986). According to Foucault, previous mechanisms of power can be described as *negative* power, meaning the power to make people *not* behave in certain ways, and ultimately the power to potentially end people's lives (Sandmo, 1999). This new form of disciplinary power, on the other hand, concerns life itself, a form of *positive* power which enters deeply into people's existence (Ibid.). As Sandmo (1999) explains it, "this power captures the body, soul and psyche – it shapes and creates the new, modern individual, its behavioral and thought patterns, and its self-awareness" (p. 85, my translation). Contrary to power which may stop one from acting in a certain way, disciplinary power is productive, in the sense that it encourages certain acts over others (Sandmo, 1999).

According to Foucault (1982), an important feature of a power relationship is that it consists of two elements which are each indispensable in order for it to truly be a power relation. The first one is that "'the other" (the one over whom power is exercised) be thoroughly recognized and maintained to the very end as a person who acts" and "that faced with a relationship of power, a whole field of responses, reactions, results, and possible inventions may open up." (Foucault, 1982:789). In other words, for a power relation to truly exist, "the other" has to maintain confidence in her individuality and freedom of action and see her actions as chosen from a wide field of possible options, unbound by outside forces. As Foucault puts it; "The exercise of power consists in guiding the possibility of conduct and putting in order the possible outcome." (Foucault, 1982).

#### 4.2.5 Governmentality and freedom

Foucault argue that the term "government", should be used in its broadest sense, as it did in the sixteenth century, when it did not only refer to political structures or to the management of states, but to "the way in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed: the government of children, of souls, of communities, of families, of the sick." (Foucault, 1982:790). "To govern" is in a way the act of structuring the possible field of actions for others (Ibid.). One way to interpret this is that the nature of power is understood as the governing power to steer people in certain favorable directions. Brown (2003) notes that the

term “governmentality” is “intended to signify the modern importance of *governing* over ruling, and the critical role of mentality in governing as opposed to the notion that power and ideas are separate phenomena.” (from footnote).

Governmentality is consequently thought of as “techniques of governing that exceed express state action and orchestrate the subject’s conduct toward him or herself” (Brown, 2003). The exercise of power does in other words require subjects who rationally make choices, consider alternative actions, and have a sense of personal responsibility for their chosen actions (Brown, 2003). As Foucault puts it; “Power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free.” (Foucault, 1982:790). On this point about freedom, Foucault’s is both saying that freedom disappears when power is exercised, at the same time as he consistently points out the necessity of freedom for power to be exercised (Foucault, 1982). To understand what Foucault means by his view on freedom, his position on power relations must be kept in mind. “In any case, to live in society is to live in such a way that action upon other actions is possible - and in fact ongoing. A society without power relations can only be an abstraction.” (Foucault, 1982:791).

Importantly, Foucault stresses how “individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application.” (1986:234). By this he means that individuals cannot be seen as simply the target of someone else’s exercise of power, but are “the elements of its articulation”, meaning individuals come from a position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising power (Ibid.). As argued by Scoular (2010), “The insight that power is productive and not simply repressive makes the liberal notion of freedom from the law naïve.” (p. 36). One way to interpret this, is as a suggestion that whether or not people consider themselves as free actors, some of our decisions are made based on structural premises which we do not have complete control over.

#### 4.2.4 A society of normalization

Scoular (2010) uses Foucault’s theory of governmentality to offer a critical account of the role of modern law in regulating sex work in neo-liberal contexts. Her insights into how sex work is regulated may tell us something transferrable about regulations of various forms of sexual commerce, such as what is occurring on the OnlyFans platform. In her work titled “What’s law got to do with it? How and why law matters in the regulation of sex work”, she points out one of Foucault’s arguments, that in so-called “normalizing societies”, law is “increasingly concerned with lives rather than with acts” (Scoular, 2010: 31). As mentioned,

on the individual level, the subject may be understood to discipline herself in order to conform to what is perceived as normalized modes of action. Instead of directing one's actions away from punishment, the encouragement to lead the "right kind of life" may be more influential.

When writing of disciplinary power and subjection, Foucault stressed how the discourse of discipline does not define the code of law, although it may carry it, it rather defines that of a norm (Foucault, 1982). Although formal law in various ways and degrees regulate the area of commercial sex in different countries, there is arguably also a presence of norms and perceived ideals which influence people's actions. Foucault arguably thought that procedures of normalization were becoming ever more engaging, and that this could explain the global functioning of what he referred to as a "society of normalization" (Foucault, 1982: 241).

#### 4.2.6 The entrepreneurial self

By building his ideas on Foucault, Peters (2001) connects the ideal of the entrepreneurial self to a form of governance. encouraging individuals "to apply certain management, economic and actuarial techniques to themselves as subjects of a newly privatized welfare regime." (Peters, 2001). The genealogy of an entrepreneurial self, as explained by Peters (2001), "reveals that it is the relationship, promoted by neoliberalism, that one establishes to oneself through forms of personal investment and insurance that becomes the central ethical component of a new individualized and privatized consumer welfare economy" (p. 60). In other words, the "entrepreneurial self" may be considered a form of governmentality, as it encourages people to act as individual agents in charge of their own future.

#### 4.2.7 Governmentality in commercial sex

When discussing what constitutes the subject in accordance with Foucault's work, Rose and Valverde (1998) point to "the encouragement, support and shaping of self-projects in such ways that in specific practices, these come into alignment with the diverse objectives of regulation", (p. 548). In line with such thinking, Scoular (2010) believes the encouragement of subjects to perform as "self-governing, rational actors" is required by the wider context of neoliberalism (p. 32):

"...This is evident in the current preoccupation with particular subjects and spaces of sex work and the operationalizing of forms of governance to save, empower, responsabilize, and

ethically reconstruct individuals – all testament to law's increasing normalizing ambitions as it acts alongside other discourses to construct ‘the fabric of the modern subject’” (2010: 31).

According to Scoular (2010), “empirical evidence points to two parallel processes in which prostitution becomes a target for the state's wider efforts to responsabilize citizens, while simultaneously maintaining spaces for the operation of the capitalist economy” (p. 30). One way to interpret this, is that when regulation of prostitution exists within the structure of a capitalist economy, power is aimed at particular subjects and spaces of sex work which does not fit into the “correct” structure. In the context of OnlyFans one can therefore ask whether its organizational structure conforms to the current operations of a capitalist economy, which again could have an effect on potential future regulations of the platform.

## 4.3 Feminist perspectives on sex as a commodity

### 4.3.1 Debate of traditional feminist perspectives

In their most simplified form, one can point to two traditional feminist perspectives with rather opposing views on women’s current position in society: radical feminism and liberal feminism. In a radical feminist perspective, a reality can be described in which the power relations between men and women are based on men’s fundamental and concrete interest in controlling, using, and oppressing women (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2014: 456) By denying women their autonomy, women are reduced to objects, which can be exploited by men. Within this type of radical feminist perspective, social structures such as capitalism, racism, and heterosexism, are often seen as supporting a patriarchal system of female oppression (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2014: 461).

For liberal feminists on the other hand, the fight against political and economic inequality as a consequence of the traditional division of labor, is at the very core of their fight for gender equality (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2014: 453). As described by Hakim (2010), the empowerment of women, referring to women’s increased autonomy and strengthened sense of agency, can be realized as women make use of their “erotic capital”. Drawing on Bourdieu’s concept of capital, namely economic, cultural, and social capital, Hakim describes erotic capital as a fourth form of capital, a personal resource particularly useful for women, although persistently neglected as such Hakim (2010). From this perspective, Hakim argues that erotic capital can be utilized outside the private sphere, such as with commercial sex.

### 4.3.2 A postfeminist shift

According to Rosalind Gill in Banet-Weiser, Gill, and Rottenberg (2020), “The term postfeminism came to prominence in the 1990s in the English-speaking world as a way of making sense of paradoxes and contradictions in the representation of women.” (p. 4). In Gill’s (2008) study of female sexual agency in contemporary advertising, she notes: “Rather than being presented as passive objects of the male gaze, young women in adverts are now frequently depicted as active, independent and sexually powerful.” (Gill, 2008, from abstract). According to Gill this pointed to an apparent shift in how women were represented in advertising and media culture at the time.

While the term postfeminism has come to be used in many different ways, Gill positions herself as a feminist analyst of postfeminist culture, contrary to what she calls a postfeminist analyst or theorist (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020). As such, she coined the term postfeminist sensibility, for three main reasons; “to contribute to conceptual clarity about the term”, “to emphasize how postfeminism should be considered as a critical object”, and for the notion of a sensibility “to be used empirically as a way of analyzing popular culture” (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020:5). The term postfeminism will here be used in a similar way as an analytical tool to describe and discuss certain narratives and discourses within a culture, specifically within the OnlyFans digital realm.

Bay-Cheng (2015) notes how young women in contemporary western societies display female sexual power and appetite, unapologetically, apparently unbound from and unconcerned with traditional gendered sexual norms (p. 282). By gendered sexual norms, she refers to the traditional ways in which women’s sexuality has been marked, such as along a “continuum of sexual activity”, ranging from virtuous (virgins) to licentious (sluts)” (Bay-Cheng, 2015: from abstract). In other words, she argues that norms around female sexuality seems to become more liberal, which may offer a release from traditional gendered moralist norms. However, Bay-Cheng (2015) notes, this virgin-slut continuum is not the only dimension in which contemporary young women are evaluated. The so-called “agency line” has emerged as an intersecting dimension, marking women’s supposed sexual agency, “creating a multidimensional matrix that young women must navigate” (Bay-Cheng, 2015:280).



### 4.3.3 Sexual agency

So, what is sexual agency and why is it so seemingly important for women in contemporary western societies? According to Bay-Cheng (2015) sexual agency has to do with the degree of control women proclaim or are perceived to exert over their own sexual behavior (p. 828). As Gill (2008) points out, the focus on sexual agency has led to representations of women as active, beautiful, smart, powerful sexual subjects, instead of passive, “dumb” or unintelligent sex objects (p. 52). In other words, by making sexual agency a normative goal, a woman’s sexual activity in itself is no longer as important as whether she is in control of it and taking responsibility for her own sexuality. The contemporary woman is seemingly able to choose “when to be girly and when to be powerful, when to be a mother and when to be professional, when to be sexy for male pleasure and when to be sexy for their own pleasure” (Zaslow, 2009: 2-3). From a postfeminist perspective, this offers freedom of choice which is thought to have been lacking for older generations of women. Considering how female sexuality often has been thought of as oppressed, it can be argued that this shift is a positive one, as such representations of ideal femininity allows women more power and agency (Gill, 2008:52).

Contrary to that which commonly has been subject to feminist critiques, such as ‘this ad objectifies women’, advertisements are said to have pulled away from simply female objectifying advertisements in recent years (Gill, 2008). Of course, both traditional “objectifying” representations still exists today, and advertisement where women were depicted as sexual subjects also existed in the past, however, Gill (2008) argues that there has been an increased focus on female agency in contemporary advertisement. The specific form of female “empowerment”, being sexual agency, is arguably a central aspect of postfeminist thinking (eg. Banet-Weiser et al., 2020; Gill, 2008; Zaslow, 2009).

### 4.3.4 A critical account of postfeminism

From critical feminist perspectives on the cultural postfeminist shift, it has be argued that the multidimensional matrix young women now have to navigate in order to conform to the normative prescription of womanhood, only offer yet another way to confine and control women’s behavior and position in society (eg. Bay-Cheng, 2015; Zaslow, 2009). As Bay-Cheng (2015) puts it; “young women remain confined to a prescribed normative space that divides them from one another, compels self-blame, and predicates their worth on cultural appraisals of their sexuality” (from abstract).

Critical accounts of girl power media have seen this development as representing an inauthentic but simple route to the type of success and agency previously denied to women (Harris, 2004). Although the postfeminist notion of women depicted as independent and powerful, certainly contradicts a radical feminist notion of traditional female objectification and oppression, there may still be strong prescriptions of ideal womanhood within postfeminist culture. According to Gill (2008), an obsessional preoccupation with the female body is apparent in the shift from objectification to sexual subjectification of women. Contrary to caring, nurturing or motherhood, the possession of a “sexy body” may be the main source of women’s capital and sense of female identity (Gill, 2008). Prescriptive norms of ideal womanhood may therefore still be subject to cultural and structural forces.

According to Lazar (2006) the global discourse of popular postfeminism includes “the assumption that feminist struggles have ended, that full equality for all women has been achieved, and that women of today can ‘have it all’” (p. 505). While both previous and present constructs of womanhood can be problematic and exclusionary, the postfeminist shift also contains a belief in increased gender equality, which may be what Harris (2004) is critical towards when describing girl power media as an inauthentic route to success and agency for women.

“A crucial aspect of both the obsessional preoccupation with the body and the shift from objectification to sexual subjectification is that this is framed in advertising through a discourse of playfulness, freedom and, above all, *choice*. Women are presented as not seeking men’s approval but as pleasing themselves, and, in so doing, they ‘just happen’ to win men’s admiration.” (Gill, 2008:42).

If empowerment is secured through the possession of a certain type of female body, one that is alluring to men, she questions whether this is truly empowerment for women (Gill, 2008).

#### 4.3.5 A neoliberal rationality

Many critical analysts of postfeminist culture, including Bay-Cheng (2015) have argued that neoliberalism is at the heart of the empowerment and sexual agency discourse. Although neoliberalism mostly has been associated with macroeconomic and social policies that open markets, deregulate industry and abandon social welfare, it is also argued that fundamental principles of such policies manifests psychologically in us, presenting a *neoliberal rationality* (Brown, 2003). By neoliberal rationality, Brown referred to; “the prioritization of self-interest

and self-service; entitlement to autonomous choice and striving; personal responsibility for all consequences” (in Bay-Cheng, 2015:280).

Within a neoliberal perspective, personal responsibility is highlighted, and release is offered from external structures, such as gendered sexual moralism, in exchange for personal responsibility (Bay-Cheng, 2015). As theorized by Zaslow (2009), the postfeminist ideals of empowerment, or “girl power”, may be rooted in such neoliberal language of choice and focus on personal responsibility. The girl represented in girl power media “believes that she should be treated as an equal to her male peers, that she should be in control of her own body, that she is entitled to play tough and be smart, that she can, and will, support herself financially, and that her future should be self-determined.” (Zaslow, 2009:4). Financial independence is undoubtedly a central aspect of postfeminist discourse. Not unlike a neoliberal rationality, the focus on personal agency, responsibility, and self-interest, is at the core of the girl power discourse. The postfeminist norms of contemporary womanhood, such as being active, independent, and sexually powerful (Gill, 2008), does as such fit well into the logic of neoliberalism.

Looking at the postfeminist idea of “girl power” from a critical perspective, it has been understood as a product which is essentially located, produced, and distributed in a capitalist economy (Zaslow, 2009). “The worth of a cultural expression is based on its exchange value in the market rather than what it can contribute to the cultural commons or social progress” (Durham in Zaslow, 2009: 5). By this, she discusses whether it is mainly corporations who profit from girl power culture, without it truly serving girls themselves. When considering how the girl power discourse fits into the context of neoliberalism, Harris (2004) argues similarly argues that “as our cultural imagination begins to position girls as power-brokers and self-determined citizens, and as girls, in actuality, become more visible as consumers, students, and employees, they may become vulnerable to increasing scrutiny and regulation from governments, educators, and market analysts who seek to know and control the girls they “manage” and in whom they invest.” (p. 8). This idea will be considered in the when discussing whether OnlyFans can be considered empowering for women in general.

## 5.0 Analysis

I will now lay out some of the main findings which can be related back to the topic of norms around sex as a commodity on the digital platform OnlyFans. A number of interesting stories and themes arose from the interviews, many which could be suitable for further discussion. This chapter will focus on answering the research questions that were formulated in chapter 1.1, based on the empirical findings made in the interviews with the female content creators.

The analysis has been divided into four parts, each presenting a theme which came to be emphasized during the interviews. The first part, “Normalizing sexualization”, looks at the intentions and motivations of the informants to use the OnlyFans platform. In this part I examine how the sexualizations of bodies on OnlyFans seemed to be understood in relation to the economic opportunities presented by the platform. Here I will look at how the concepts of opportunity and responsibility were presented in an essentially liberal perspective. Many interesting statements were made in this regard, which will be discussed as a sign of postfeminist thinking.

The second part, “Strategic work”, contains a more descriptive analysis of the various strategies applied by the informants in their OnlyFans work. In other words, how they used the platform. Many of these strategies are importantly made possible by the digital nature of the platform, which will be further discussed in the final chapter of this thesis. By applying certain strategies, content creators on OnlyFans are able to work more efficiently and maintain some distance to their work. The strategies concerned effective ways to work, creating exclusiveness, marking distance to other creators, and maintaining a depersonalized relation to the platform.

In the third part of this chapter, “Sexual commerce in the digital realm”, some main aspects of the digital element of OnlyFans are analyzed through the stories of the informants. This part looks deeper into how the digital nature of OnlyFans is understood. The role of the digital will be analyzed in terms of how it seems to enable a separation between “the digital” and “the real” self. From the perspective of the informants, by separating the two, the OF creator of sexualized content seems able to distance and protect her “idea of self”, while the digital images of her body represent an objective persona created to make profit.

The last part, “Personal boundaries”, focuses on the idea and creation of boundaries, where I will look at how the girls saw and used boundaries to protect their “sense of self”.

Throughout the interviews there were conflicting ideas in terms of the opportunities provided by OnlyFans, and the potential downsides of using the platform. This is the focus of this last part. In regard to boundaries, the inclusion of high profit was referred to as a potential mediator for people to stretch their boundaries. The perception of individual responsibility will also be analyzed as it was brought up as a two-sided coin.

Through this following analysis of main findings, I aim to describe and reflect on how the informants themselves conceived of their OnlyFans work. Some of the chosen themes are overlapping, and some of the findings will be further discussed in the final chapter of this thesis. The voice of Professor Skilbrei, from the supplementary interview, will also be brought in at various points to provide nuance to some of these findings. Lastly it should be noted that many more themes surfaced during the interviews, however, this analysis contains a selection of the themes deemed most relevant to the thesis and research questions of this study.

## 5.1 Normalizing sexualization

### 5.1.1 Economic opportunity

When asked the question of biggest motivation for using OnlyFans, each informant clearly called out economic profit. Even though other motivations arose, which I will return to later, they all seemed highly motivated by money. It was also significant to note that OF created an opportunity for a level of income they did not perceive as achievable in any other way. One girl stated that she “had been on NAV” earlier, meaning she had been receiving unemployment benefits from the government, and OnlyFans was the only work she had ever done. She concluded her thought by saying “and so for me, this is just insane”, referring to the high amount of money she had been able to make selling her content online.

Another girl was quick to point out how she also had a “regular job”, she now worked part time as a nurse. However, as she pointed out, you don’t make that kind of money from nursing, and so OnlyFans represented an opportunity for “good money”. Whether or not “good money” is considered a level of income above average, the informants seemed to have a perception of regular work as either difficult to attain or presenting limited economic opportunities.

“I’ve always been saying that there are so many people sharing very undressed photos on Instagram, twitter, so like, why not get paid for it?”. This argument was made by an informant, and similar expressions were common among the informants, specifically pointing out the economic opportunity OnlyFans offered. All the informants of this study could report a significant income from OnlyFans, and to be one of the women who had seen the economic opportunity of OnlyFans, and taken advantage of it, was evidently presented with a sense of pride.

When interviewing Skilbrei, this research finding was brought up, and the professor could inform of similar ideas being present in her research of various sex work markets. For sex workers to perceive of themselves as being of a special entrepreneurial caliber, someone innovative and unique in the sense of capability to make use of the possibility’s life has to offer, was common. Skilbrei referred to this as a neoliberal spirit, and saw it as commonly played out in sex work markets. As mentioned by Peters (2001), the economic motivation and possibly the uninterest in receiving social support, as mentioned by one informant, can be interpreted as an expression of the “entrepreneurial self”, someone who is working independently as a responsible subject in a privatized system.

### 5.1.2 To sexualize one’s body for profit

One informant told of a male friend who also had tried to make money from OnlyFans by posting sexy pictures of himself. In her opinion, the reason why it had been harder for him to gain economically from OnlyFans, was because men’s bodies were not as sexualized as women’s bodies. “I feel that is just because men’s bodies are shown so much more easily and freely than women’s”. When the informants were asked what they thought of women’s bodies possibly being objectified in a greater sense than men’s bodies, one informant perceived it as strange, while still optimistically pointing out the opportunity for women to gain economically from their bodies.

Although none of the informants, when asked, would claim to promote any specific feminist perspective, certain views of what it meant to sexualize one’s body for profit was openly discussed. In contrast to a radical feminist view on sexual commerce as inherently exploitative and problematic, the informants were quick to point out the freedom of choice and possibilities OnlyFans could offer women. This suggests more liberal views in terms of feminist perspectives (Hakim, 2010). As conceptualized by Hakim, identifying, and using “erotic capital” as a resource for economic gain may be seen as a pillar for the liberal

perspective on women's ability to use sex as a commodity. By focusing on the economic opportunities represented by a platform such as OnlyFans, the often-problematized views on objectifying the female body possibly lessened in the eyes of the informants.

As one informant put it: "OnlyFans is a great platform for girls who wish to be independent and make their own money (...) In my opinion it is liberating for women" (informant 3, my translation). From a liberal feminist perspective, one could say this statement points to expanded opportunities in the digital realm for women to use their erotic capital to make money. When discussing this with Skilbrei, she pointed out how it is hard to tell if new digital platforms reflect something more comprehensive, or if it is simply a new variation of what we have already seen. "Commercial sex is always in motion and tends to be early adaptors of all technological trends." (Skilbrei), as such it becomes important to recognize that commercial sex has existed in various forms throughout history, and so sexualizing one's body for profit is not something new in itself.

Skilbrei also emphasized how more resourceful women historically has engaged in commercial sex, although this traditionally has not gained the same public attention. As seen in previous literature, the way commercial sex presents itself to its surroundings can be seen as vital for both recruitment, societal acceptance, and how or if legal regulations come into play (Bjønness et al., 2021). As will be further discussed, the digital realm may be understood to mediate some of the common challenges of combining sex and money, thus allowing women to take advantage of their erotic capital in a more normatively acceptable way.

### 5.1.3 "CEO of selling myself"

"So especially women have always been sexualized. However, if women do it to their own advantage, it's like oh she is only doing it for the money, she is a slut... But if you are a professional model, doing the same thing that I do and have a team behind you, then it's a totally different thing in some people's eyes. Even if it's sexy pictures. I just think that some people don't like that we can use our bodies to make money for ourselves. And people post a lot of the same things that I do on social media, or sends nudes to people they barely know, or posts hot bikini pictures on Instagram. But it's like if you make people pay for it, then it's more frowned upon I think."

Similarly, to the statement made by this informant, another informant expressed critique towards so-called "influencers", who claim *not* to sexualize their body on social media.

“Sexualized bodies are what makes money online”. The only difference, she would claim, was that the girls on OnlyFans were honest about it. “I try to sexualize my body. I can’t destroy it for the customer by saying this is all natural, just a body. I rather have to make them believe that this is very important and sexual. We sell fantasies you know.”

The general acceptance towards sexualizing one’s own body in such a direct sense was interesting. From a postfeminist perspective it may reflect what Bay-Cheng (2015) referred to as our contemporary western society offering a cultural release from external structures, such as gendered sexual moralism. Considering the perspective of women’s erotic capital as commonly exploited and controlled by men, for instance through more traditional forms of prostitution or porn, the absence of direct male interference likely takes away some of the most problematic aspects of utilizing one’s erotic capital. Such statements may point to a normative change in the acceptance towards sexualizing one’s own body, and consequently the acceptance to profit from it.

As one informant had written in the description area of one of her social media profiles, and as discussed under her interview, she referred to herself as “The CEO of selling myself”. The way she saw it, she had created a profitable business of sharing digital content displaying her body which people were willing to pay big sums of money for. And so, with a smile on her face, she confirmed how she thought of herself as the CEO of “selling herself”.

Based on statements such as those above, the idea seemed to be that as long as you are the subject in charge, you can proudly make the choice to sell sexualized content on a digital platform such as OnlyFans. Being in charge of when and how one is to exploit their own body and sexuality, seemed to be an essential part of legitimizing the act of converting erotic capital into economic capital. “We choose for ourselves what we wish to do, and if we ever do anything we don’t really want to do, we cannot blame anyone other than ourselves. We must take the consequences of our choices.”. In other words, freedom of choice and individual responsibility seemed to be at the very core of how OnlyFans was perceived by the informants. Such perspectives on individual responsibility and choice have a lot in common with what has been written about postfeminist culture (Bay-Cheng, 2015; Gill, 2008; Zaslow, 2009:2-3).



## 5.2 Strategic work

### 5.2.1 Effective work strategy

As one girl described it, OnlyFans could be an effective way to make money if you were smart about it. There was undoubtedly a sense of pride in the way some of the girls talked about the strategies they had incorporated in order to spend a minimal amount of time “drifting” their OnlyFans-account. The general ideal seemed to be that by working efficiently and smart, you did not have to put much effort into your OnlyFans account.

For instance, one girl said she was currently posting pictures from 2016 as she was feeling a little unmotivated to create new content at the moment. Another girl told of how she would spend half an hour taking a lot of photos in different outfits, in different areas of her house, in order to load up on content so she could strategically and gradually share it on her OnlyFans profile during the following weeks or months. “This is just how it works” she claimed, “I can’t sit there without clothes all the time hoping someone will buy pictures of me, that doesn’t work. And it doesn’t matter to me what they think, the most important thing for me is that they believe it is here and now.”.

The digital realm, and particularly the organizational structure of a digital platform such as OnlyFans, where content can be premade, seemed to introduce new features which were mediating the experiences of this study’s informants. The opportunity to make profit from digital content without having to be physically present, nor present at the time of the exchange, was brought up as an argument for why the platform was considered attractive. As will be further discussed, the informants of this study seemed to put a lot of emphasis on the distance they were able to maintain between their personal life and their OnlyFans work because of the way OnlyFans was organized.

### 5.2.2 Strategy of authenticity

When asked if previously shot content was shared as if it was all occurring in real time, and whether this was important, the answer tended towards yes. The explanation referred to how it seemed essential for the customers’ experience to feel as if what they were seeing was as authentic as possible. The informants also expressed the importance of making “the men” feel as if they had a relation to them on a somewhat personal level. And so, even when physical distance was upheld and the trade between sexual content and money was strictly contained

to the digital realm, the wish for presence and authenticity was upheld. As described by an informant: “There are thousands of boobs you could see for free, but they still would rather pay to see a specific person’s boobs and talk to them as well”.

When contrasting OnlyFans to mass produced porn, the “advantages” of subscribing to an OnlyFans account, may in part be the potential for a more authentic relation through the possibility of direct communication with the seller of content. Although additional research from the perspective of subscribers would be needed to confirm this idea, Bernstein’s concept of bounded authenticity seems applicable for the approach to economic trade in sexualized photos and videos on OnlyFans, similarly to other forms of contemporary sex work such as webcamming (Jones, 2021). According to most of the informants, spending time on, and trying to navigate conversations in line with the subscribers’ needs and wishes was seen as an essential part of the OnlyFans work. Even though direct messaging was talked about as a tiresome portion of the work, most informants saw it as an essential element to keep the customers interested, so they would continue on as subscribers.

Considering how OnlyFans first and foremost is a subscriber-based platform, rather than a one-time purchase, strategies to keep the subscribers’ interest over time were undoubtedly considered meaningful. One way to do this seemed to be through continuous adaptation and creation of a digital persona admired and wanted by individual subscribers, promising more intimate content to come, and directly communicating to ensure a feeling of authenticity.

When asked about the content of these messages, they appeared to be mostly sexually loaded, and were for instance described as sexual “teasing”. One informant also told of more regular conversations about work or studies, however, she would later state, it was unfortunately mostly sexually loaded conversations that were pursued. Overall, there seemed to be consensus in terms of how the girls saw their role in these conversations. Although one claimed to have an interest on some level as to how some of her subscribers were actually doing, this part of “the work” was mostly that, work. As one of the informants explained it: “To act as if you are kind of a dumb bimbo who is super horny while you really just sit there with a straight face typing something like ‘oh yes, I’m so horny, it is so nice to look at it.’” (my translation). In other words, OnlyFans work seemed to require more from women than the presence of their sexual body.

### 5.2.3 Strategy of exclusiveness

Although the informants were familiar with the general idea that the more you show the more you earn, this did not seem to be the only rule of thumb. One informant repeatedly expressed how impressive it was with those who made a lot while only showing a little. The strategy of constructing “exclusiveness” appeared more or less present in all the informants’ mindsets.

As told by informants, their subscribers can request personalized content, and OnlyFans allows for extra “tips” to be received. One informant told of how she shared more intimate content in chats than what she was willing to upload on the OnlyFans “wall” where all subscribers would be able to see it. This was mainly a way to be in control of whom she was exposing herself to, as well as a strategy she believed to be profitable. By holding back while also being suggestive of what more she might share, she found that men were intrigued and excited, resulting in a willingness to pay more.

When discussing motivations for using OnlyFans, one informant also expressed a certain satisfaction in knowing how interested the men became in seeing more of her, while being in control over whether they would. From a postfeminist perspective, this could be interpreted as proclaiming her sexual agency by expressing control over her sexual behavior (Bay-Cheng, 2015). Being in control over the situation did as such seem to play into her subjective feeling of empowerment.

### 5.2.4 Marking distance

“Many of these girls sell pictures where they spread their legs and ask for an 8\$ tip if someone wants to see a video of it. But then they have already flashed themselves for free to 20 000 people... like what is happening? (...) I think it is just insane, I don’t think they have reflected on it, and I think they will regret it. I hope for their sake that they sell a lot so that it becomes like a mass-production or mass-sale. At least then they are left with some kind of profit. Because this is just embarrassing to observe.”

While this informant seemed concerned about how reckless some girls were about selling pictures or videos of themselves, her main concern seemed to be how bad their economic strategy was, and the imbalance of exposure vs. profit. When expressing how these girls would likely regret their actions, the imagined regret seemed to be less about the act of having shared such intimate content, and more about having shared it for such a low price.

Informants were in general eager to discuss how many girls on OnlyFans did not appear to have any boundaries and engaged in “bad strategies” in terms of accumulating income. For instance, one informant told of a friend she had recruited who had begun her OnlyFans journey “by posting a picture of her buttocks”, proceeding to ask the informant how much she should take to sell a picture in her underwear.

“When you have posted a picture of your buttocks for free, you have laid the foundation for a bad business. I mean this was her first day. She was only planning to show some feet she said, but that quickly evolved. There should almost be some sort of coaching before people are allowed to begin this, because some people really think that the more they show the more they will make. And then they do something like that, and they have ruined everything.”

While there was an economic motive for separating a “good strategy” from a “bad strategy”, which the informants of this study seemed to have a common idea of, the separation of the two might serve another function. According to Skilbrei, a common reaction of stigma is to mark distance, for instance by focusing on distinctions between one’s own actions and the actions of other people. “It is a lot easier to defend oneself against stigma by claiming that whatever someone else is doing is very problematic, but not what I am doing. Instead of saying that everything is ok, which is harder to get away with, it is easier to create internal boundaries within the phenomena. This is known from research on prostitution in all countries.” (Skilbrei, my translation). From this perspective, one may understand the wish to distance oneself from stigma through describing other girls’ use of OnlyFans as problematic, while oneself has figured out a “good” way to take advantage of the platform.

### 5.2.5 Depersonalized relationship to the platform

The informants seemed to have a rather depersonalized relationship towards both their own work on the platform, other content creators and their work, and the platform itself. Some informants described OnlyFans as “easy money”, and one girl specifically liked the idea of «making a lot while working just a little” (Informant). Firstly, this idea may fit into what Sanders et al. (2018) claimed in regard to people making cost-benefit decisions to work in the sex industry. Secondly, it may be seen in contrast to a description of prostitution in its traditional form, selling sexual services, where it is harder to get away with the intimate aspect of what the work entails. By focusing on how «little» one has to work, in the case of OnlyFans referring to the time spent creating sexy content, one may be less vulnerable to potential stigma. In other words, maintaining the perspective of OnlyFans work as “easy” and

unproblematic, may minimize the potential cost of stigma. Distancing oneself from any intimate aspects of what the OnlyFans work entailed was common throughout interviews, and the informants all seemed to distance themselves from other girls on OnlyFans, and whatever work they were doing in order to make a profit.

When one informant was asked how she felt about the OnlyFans owners taking a certain percentage of her earnings on the platform, her main concern was how she would not have been able to make the same amount of money if OnlyFans did not exist. From a radical feminist perspective, one can suggest that the owners of OnlyFans indirectly act as facilitators of sexual commerce, as some form of “pimps”, but such connections did not seem relevant for any of the informants’ line of thought. This points to the informant’s rather depersonalized relationship to the platform itself, where the use of it seems to have an explicitly instrumental function, that of individual economic profit.

## 5.3 Sexual commerce in the digital realm

### 5.3.1 Avoiding stigma

“You have to own it”, was a statement very important to one informant. For her, one of the most important factors for succeeding on OnlyFans, was to do it openly and proudly. Even though other informants appeared to be slightly more anonymous on the platform, mainly by hesitating to include their face in their photos, they generally held the same notion that you should not be using OnlyFans unless you were secure enough to be open about it.

However, considering how the informants worded themselves regarding social acceptance from family, friends, social media and public media, the issue of stigma was nevertheless a relevant subject. One informant was quick to point out how much less stigmatized selling sexualized photos and videos had become during the last few years. As she had been doing this for quite some time she felt as though she should almost get some credit for having endured the stigma at a time when it was not as normalized as she believed it was today. Although she still experienced negative comments both online and offline, the amount of them seemed to have decreased. From her point of view, the increase in girls turning to digital platforms such as OnlyFans for economic gain, was thought to have had a positive effect in terms of fighting stigma around using sex as a commodity.

At the same time, the informant reflected on how it “might have been better back when there was some shame about it so that less people dared to do it.”. Although generally positive towards the opportunities offered by OnlyFans, there seemed to be an internal conflict surrounding what the development of normalizing sex as a commodity may mean on a societal level vs. the economic opportunity it offered her on a personal level. This type of internal conflict or conflicting views were not uncommon throughout the interviews.

### 5.3.2 Separation from the digital self

“I am a totally different person privately. I don’t even wear makeup, I usually just walk around in sweatpants, and don’t even like going out and partying and all that which people think I do, I am kind of more calm and prefer to be at my cabin and knit and stuff like that. I am kind of boring really haha”.

In addition to wanting to express how “regular” she was behind the screen and what a regular life she really had, she referred to her OnlyFans profile as being some form alias of another personality. When asked to go into what the digital realm meant for her willingness to share intimate content of her body, the answer was “everything”. “I don’t even wear a bikini on the beach in Norway” (Informant 2, my translation). The informant’s view of her digital self on the other hand, was “an alias where I am very outgoing, cool and confident”. Contrasting this to how she saw herself in “real life”, suggests that the digital realm may allowed for a constructed persona to be created. While describing herself as introverted and dealing with social anxiety, she pointed out that “sharing of herself digitally was much safer [than in reality]”.

Across all interviews, the wish to separate one’s sense of self from the work done on OnlyFans appeared significant. As have been commonly theorized, the barriers of physical closeness made by the digital realm, may understandably serve to protect the person against potential physical harm (Jones, 2021; Ryan, 2019). In addition, creating a *psychological* distance between the act of receiving money and sharing intimate content, also appeared to be a possibility in the digital arena. As mentioned by one informant “if the neighbor approached me on the street, gave me 1000kr and said, ‘I hope you have a great day’, that would be super uncomfortable.”. An emotional barrier between one self and one’s costumers, through the use of the digital, seemed to be present in this informant’s mind.

When interviewing professor Skilbrei and discussing how my OnlyFans informants seemed inclined to create this distance between themselves as “normal people”, and their work as something different, Skilbrei could recognize this from her own research. Based on her various research on prostitution, Skilbrei had experienced how people who sell sex were very good at creating boundaries, meaning they both symbolically and emotionally were able to keep things separated. This was of great importance to many who sold sex in a physical space.

In regard to using the digital world as a tool to maintain such boundaries, another idea of what it means for something to occur digitally was discussed. According to Skilbrei, by trading bodily or sexual content for money online, one may also be inviting people even closer into one’s private sphere, than if the transaction were to happen in the physical world, outside one’s home. In short, this is because we tend to keep our phones and computers so close to us, the content may be recorded from one’s one bedroom, and it may be argued that our digital lives are gaining increased importance in our contemporary western societies. From this perspective, it may be argued that digital forms of sex work penetrate even deeper into people’s private lives.

### 5.3.3 Impression management

All the informants were presented with a hypothetical scenario where the perceived impact of the digital realm in the context of sexual commerce would be explored. To imagine the act of letting their subscribers view them through a window rather than a screen and receiving payments for simply being present by this window while being watched from the other side. Everyone’s instant answer was no. As many came to explain, the advantage of presence through a screen was the control it gave over what and when content was to be shared.

As mentioned in the methodology chapter, one of the informants did not feel comfortable being viewed through a video, and so her interview was conducted through the phone. When asked whether she felt comfortable posting pictures of videos of herself on OnlyFans, she explained how this was different, as she was able to control the outcome of content to a greater extent. The advantage of selling premade content for in comparison to for example webcamming, may be Sanders et al. (2018) referred to as a greater opportunity for impression management. Through OnlyFans, it seemed to be an opportunity to make profit from bodies in absentia, as further argued by Sanders et al. (2018).

When discussing one's relationship to the physical body, an absence of confidence was evident for more than one informant. "I am not happy with my body, I feel like I can pose and get a good angle, but I wouldn't like moving around where everyone can observe me from all angles."

The informants were also asked whether their relationships to their own bodies had changed after starting using OnlyFans, and the answers differed. One informant clearly stated that nothing had changed, another explained how she in some ways felt sexier, at the same time as she didn't really feel it in "reality". "I feel like that internet-version of myself is sexier than I have ever felt myself. And so, people at least think I am sexier than I believe to be myself, and maybe they believe I think I am so as well [sexy]". For women in general, the opportunity to manage and present oneself in a favorable light in the digital realm, may speak of a change in terms of what we perceive as the "normal" looks and lives of women. This could suggest that the digital realm mediates our perceptions of society and women.

## 5.4 Personal boundaries

### 5.4.1 "A piece of meat"

One informant was planning to quit OnlyFans. "Actually, I want to get out of it. I want to get a normal job and make money there, that way.". When asked why, she replied "I am so fed up with it. I am so fed up with selling pictures of my body, taking pictures of my body... I am so fed up.". When diving into why she felt so fed up with her OnlyFans work, the informant bluntly stated that she was tired of feeling like "a piece of meat". From a radical feminist perspective, the informant's statement could be seen as an expression of OnlyFans as yet another arena where women are being objectified. While the other informants seemed to agree that their bodies essentially were objectified, or looked at as "pieces of meat", knowing they were in charge of how and when they decided to use their bodies appeared to be comforting.

Even though this informant was making a great amount of money, the emotional toll it seemed to take on her was beginning to weigh heavily. At the time of the interview, she was looking into waitressing work and said: "I feel like when I work as a waitress, my head is kind of more in place, my body is tired, but my head is kind of at peace. Just like it should be.". This informant was also the most anonymous OnlyFans user and was very specific about not wanting to show her face in the content she posted, as she claimed the face made it



too personal. As discussed, the element of depersonalization seemed to matter to many of the informants. Not wanting to show one's face can be seen as another strategy to distance oneself from stigma around working with sex as a commodity.

#### 5.4.2 “If we exceed the boundary, the amount should be worth it”

As mentioned, OnlyFans consists of many different types of content creators, whereas those who make profit from pictures and videos of themselves, also vary a lot in the extent of nudity and sexual engagement present in their content. When asked about boundaries, the importance of having boundaries was generally agreed upon by all informants. Some admitted to having stretched them a little over the years. All informants of this study did however claim to have relatively strict personal boundaries compared to other content creators on OnlyFans. For instance, none of them would post full nudity on their OnlyFans page, and they never agreed to meet any subscribers in person. Some did nevertheless seem slightly reluctant to disclaim what was shared in the one-on-one chats, which is a private area for direct communication between subscriber and content creator.

According to one informant, it was problematic that people on OnlyFans generally were so willing to expose themselves, as this possibly led to everyone's boundaries being stretched. If one considers how OnlyFans may follow the same structure as any capitalistic market, the presence of supply and demand undoubtedly also influences the dynamics between potential buyers and sellers of content. In order to stay relevant and “in demand” it seemed clear that one had to be strategic and adaptive. Despite having set boundaries for oneself, keeping strict boundaries could be interpreted as being in conflict with the platform's internal structure and demand for continual adaptation. The underlying motivation of economic profit did in other words seem to be a potential mediator to one's willingness to cross personal boundaries.

«If we exceed the boundary, the amount should be worth it”. This interesting quote was expressed by an informant while discussing the importance of personal boundaries within the OnlyFans work. Although quite clear and confident in her unwillingness to share certain things, such as a full nude or video of a sexual act, no boundary appeared absolute in her opinion. If someone were to offer a significantly large sum of money, she stated that she would likely be willing to stretch her boundaries. However, she pointed out, “that is just not realistic”.

Following this reflection, the informant was asked to explain the process of setting the price for both the monthly subscription and individual sales of content. In general, prices seemed to be highly determined by the market, as one had to place themselves at a price-level relative to other content creators on the platform. Not setting the price too high, not too low, but somewhere in the good middle, was ideal. This seemed to be important for all the informants and could be interpreted as an expression of adapting to the market.

#### 5.4.3 From freedom to dependence

As mentioned, an important focus throughout the interviews was to gain insight into the informants' perspectives of what OnlyFans represented to them, and their motivations for using it. While one informant talked about her own motivations for becoming economically independent by using OnlyFans, she also pondered on how her situation would be if she were to become economically dependent on the platform. Either because she would have difficulties finding another job based on lack of education or relevant experience, or because she would meet stigma based on her previous OnlyFans work. Another potential difficulty for the ones who had been profiting very well from their OnlyFans work, was the acknowledgement that any sort of "normal job" would not allow them to obtain the lifestyle they currently enjoyed.

While most of the informants were eager to talk about the benefits of taking advantage of the platform, as it represented an economic opportunity for them, some were also skeptical of what OnlyFans represented for women in general. When asked if OnlyFans should be considered liberating for women, this quote by one of the informants provided an interesting dichotomy.

"Yes, it is very liberating. But you know I have done pretty well on OnlyFans, very good actually, and no, I couldn't have done that 50 years ago. And it's great that no one comes and decides what each girl should post, every girl chooses for herself, and that's very good. But, at the same time, it's also like... Well, no matter how free you may feel, you still feel...well, still not really free if you know what I mean. Because it's still like, if you are not able to set your own boundaries, then you sort of get pushed... At the same time, you feel like you can decide for yourself, but then again, you also may want to make money... and so yeah..."

The ambiguity towards one's own freedom and opportunities as content creators on OnlyFans became evident in multiple interviews. When asked how they approached personal

boundaries, one informant responded by stating how you have to be “true to yourself”, referring to the necessity of knowing your own value. While most of the informants did not perceive of themselves as having any difficulty setting boundaries, they all had some thoughts in regard to other girls, and the general difficulty it could be to set boundaries for one self. “It could destroy you quite a bit if you do something when you actually don’t want to”, said one informant.

The idea that many OnlyFans girls don’t have too much money going into OnlyFans, hence the motivation to begin, was also discussed as scary, as it would make them more dependent on their customers. Which again could lead them to stretch their boundaries. “I feel sorry for those who have to say yes to almost everything because they need money, that’s not okay.” From this perspective one could suggest that the power relationship between content creator and the platform may not be as beneficial or equal as suggested by a postfeminist perspective of empowerment through exploiting one’s own erotic capital. The following quote by one of the informants may speak to this idea:

“The thing now where you’re not supposed to be judged, and you’re supposed to be able to do whatever you want and stuff... It’s good in a way, but it’s also not good for those who are very young or have mental problems and are unable to think about where they are today and where they will be in 15 years and how OnlyFans will be for them. In general, I think there should be some kind of mental check for everyone, if you are to go on TV or start an OnlyFans or whatever...”

When discussing how some people may regret doing OnlyFans, the informant was also quick to point out how the creators of the platform were only interested in making money and would never take any measures further than what they have to, in order to care for the health of the people who use their platform.

#### 5.4.4 Individual responsibility

One informant spoke of a difficult past, and wanting to reclaim ownership over her own body and sexuality:

“I was exposed to a lot of things while I was young, including sexual abuse. It was after that I became hypersexual, like the psychologists say, it is a very common reaction in girls who have been abused. They become hypersexual and don’t really know their own boundaries. And they kind of think this is the only way they can get any relationships. That was at least

the way I was, and I guess it was during that time I began selling pictures of myself, when I was 18, because I felt like it was normal back then.”

From an individual perspective, this may express how a lot of responsibility is placed on young women’s ability to act in their own best interest, which may not take into consideration how complicated a life can be. Without going further into any discussion of sexual abuse or hypersexuality, the idea of reclaiming ownership over one’s own body and sexuality through subjectively being in charge of how and when intimate content is shared, may in itself be motivational for utilizing the OnlyFans platform. Although this informant looked back at how she got into using OnlyFans as stemming from something problematic, she still conceived of her current OnlyFans work as being a good option for her. What could be referred to as the postfeminist ideal of individual responsibility, may here be descriptive of her story.

When interviewing Skilbrei, a relevant point regarding this topic was made as she pointed out how very few people want to think of themselves as a victim of circumstances. “The idea that of the self as autonomous has central value in our time, and so whatever happens one has to take responsibility, and be the kind of person who is taking action, instead of a victim.” (Professor Skilbrei, my translation). The way I see it, instead of challenging the idea that one’s body should not be objectified and exploited by others, an easier option may be to accept the premise that the body is already sexualized, and aim to be perceived as taking responsibility for how it gets objectified and potentially exploited.

## 6.0 Discussion

Many of the themes which emerged in the analysis could be interesting to discuss further. In this chapter I will take a closer look at the main question of how the digital realm might influence and mediate norms surrounding sex as a commodity through chosen theoretical perspectives. First, I will discuss how the content creators explained and understood their experiences on OnlyFans as a story of female empowerment. By taking a look at previous literature and theories of the development of commercial sex in the digital realm, I will argue that OnlyFans can be seen as reflective of our contemporary western society as content creators essentially work within a neoliberal framework. Based on the tensions that arose on an individual level between the idea of female empowerment and conflicting aspects of using the digital realm to mediate the use of sex as a commodity, I will then discuss an alternative story of power. By looking at the development of OnlyFans from a Foucauldian perspective, the story of female empowerment and liberation may be contradicted by a story of disciplinary power, where control and exploitation still exists on a structural level.

In the first story, a digital platform such as OnlyFans, may be seen as part of a technological development, which by challenging traditional stigmas around commercial sex, benefits the individual woman. In the second story, the digital realm may be seen as a facilitative tool for an illusion of increased female empowerment and agency, while preserving the idea of female sexuality as an object to be traded on a capitalistic market. From a sociology of law perspective, a potential lack of tensions between structural forces in our contemporary western society and norms around sexual commerce on OnlyFans, will be discussed. I will then offer some concluding thoughts and suggestions for future research.

### 6.1 A story of female empowerment

As shown in the analysis, specifically chapter 5.1, the informants described an acceptance towards explicitly sexualizing their bodies, which may fit into the idea that norms around female sexuality have become more liberal (eg. Bay-Cheng, 2015). As shown in the analysis, content creators on OnlyFans had a clear perception of the sexual nature of their work, and instead of downplaying this, many believed it was important to own their own sexuality and their choice to use OnlyFans for economic gain. Having and displaying control and responsibility towards the trade between sexualized content and money on OnlyFans, did in other words seem essential for their experience of using OnlyFans. From a postfeminist

perspective, as argued by Bay-Cheng (2015), one may speak of the notion that women's sexual activity in itself is not as important as whether she is taking responsibility for it and controlling it herself. As argued by Gill (2008), this suggests that the traditional consideration of female sexuality as oppressed, may be contrasted by the liberal representation of ideal femininity as including power and agency.

Women who had not participated in other forms of sexual commerce, seemed to be attracted by the opportunity to participate in commercial sexual transactions on OnlyFans. From a postfeminist perspective, OnlyFans could be considered an opportunity for women to display sexual agency and empowerment. As pointed out by Ryan (2019), OnlyFans allow people to be "the principal beneficiaries of their work", and this was important for the experiences of the content creators that were interviewed for this study. If one considers sexual agency to be an important normative goal for women in contemporary western societies (eg. Bay-Cheng, 2015), the organization of sales on OnlyFans arguably makes it possible for women to conform to this. Based on how the content creators saw the opportunity to personally exploit their own erotic capital, without direct interference from third parties, there seemed to a sense of empowerment in the idea of utilizing one's erotic capital (Hakim, 2010).

When looking at structures which potentially support this increased focus on female agency and empowerment, Zaslow (2009) argued that postfeminism is essentially rooted in neoliberalism. As shown in the analysis, specifically chapter 5.2 "Strategic work", the informants were quick to point out how necessary it was to have a sort of business mindset when working with OnlyFans. Those who did not appear to have this mindset were viewed as less successful on the platform. The general strategies that were applied in order to navigate the platform, can be interpreted as strategies to present their OnlyFans work as relatively similar to "typical work". As explained in chapter 5.2 the informants aimed towards having a depersonalized relation to the platform. In other words, to do a type of work that did not define them as people, but simply was a way to accumulate income within a field they had the ability to take advantage of. The emphasis on individual responsibility and choice, also appeared to be important for the OnlyFans informants, which can be interpreted as expressions of a neoliberal rationality (eg. Brown, 2003).

When thinking of female content creators on OnlyFans as women who saw an opportunity to take advantage of their erotic capital by utilizing the digital platform OnlyFans, a story of female empowerment may be told from a postfeminist perspective. In this story, OnlyFans

fits into our contemporary western society, and offers women an opportunity to act as empowered agents. As empowered entrepreneurs they work within a neoliberal framework which offers them the choice to gain economically from their inherent erotic capital as women. The digital platform OnlyFans may then be considered a facilitative tool for challenging traditional stigmas around commercial sex, which benefits the individual woman.

## 6.2 An alternative story of disciplinary power and governmentality

On the other hand, when considering the work of OnlyFans content creators as something which conforms to postfeminist ideals, which again is said to follow the logic of neoliberalism (eg. Gill, 2008), a second story about power may be told from a more critical, Foucauldian perspective. As suggested in the story of female empowerment, there is arguably not a great deal of tension between the organization of sales on OnlyFans, including the way content creators navigate the platform, and a neoliberal rationality and postfeminist discourse. From a Foucauldian perspective, it could therefore be suggested that neoliberalism is a disciplinary force, as it affects feminist discourses, and presents itself in women's relation to a platform such as OnlyFans. As argued by Scoular (2010), the subject in normalizing societies disciplines herself. From this perspective, a different story of power may be told, when considering that productive forces may benefit from the choices of women who make profit from selling sexualized content on OnlyFans.

To further explain and discuss this idea, one should keep in mind how Foucault saw the nature of power as the inevitable structuring of the field of actions, and through this productive force of power, the modern individual is disciplined to take certain actions over others (Foucault, 1982; Sandmo, 1999). By understanding power, not as something which forces action, but as something which moves people's actions in certain directions, it can be argued that we never truly know when our actions are in line with the power of a larger force. In a Foucauldian perspective, the OnlyFans content creator would also have to stay confident in her individuality and freedom of action, and see her choices as unbound by outside forces, for there to truly be a power relation (Foucault, 1982). And so, while this study showed that content creators put a lot of emphasis on the importance on the freedom to choose what to do, both in terms of creating an OnlyFans profile, and in deciding which content to share, one

may still speak of disciplinary power in relation to how they decided to use their sexuality as a commodity in the OnlyFans setting.

As Brown (2003) discussed in relation to Foucault's work, the idea of governmentality is that the subject governs herself in a way which exceeds state action. I will argue that this idea can be transferred to how women have found a way to use sex as a commodity on OnlyFans, which conforms to a powerful structural force in our contemporary western society. Specifically the neoliberal system, which Scoular (2010) also saw as an influential power in the governmentality of commercial sex. First, it should be noted that neoliberalism is the discourse of minimal legal regulations and free market power, and as such, regulating commercial sex does arguably not enforce its objectives. However, the discourse of discipline does not define the code of law, it rather defines that of a norm (Foucault, 1982). And so, when considering commercial sex from a Foucauldian perspective, it can be seen to regulate itself through various normative influences.

### 6.3 The role of the digital realm

As shown in the analysis, an entrepreneurial or neoliberal spirit appeared to be much more appropriate to how the content creators saw their role on OnlyFans, than any form of victim mentality. This is as mentioned recognizable from many types of sex work, and theories on stigma suggests that autonomy is important for our contemporary ideals of the modern respectable self (Bjønness et al., 2021). Workers in commercial sex consequently tend to emphasize their individual choice and agency (Ibid.). With this in mind, one may ask if the digital realm mediates this expression. Based on the analysis of content creators' experience with OnlyFans, I will argue that the digital realm, and specifically the organization of a digital platform such as OnlyFans, makes it easier for women to display a neoliberal spirit.

As further analyzed in chapter 5.3, sexual commerce on a digital platform appeared to make it possible to navigate away from typical stigma associated with the intimate aspects of sexual commerce. The digital allowed physical contact to be avoided, a blindness towards who the buyers of content are, control and management of impressions, and an apparent avoidance of discomfort towards the economic exchange. The digital realm thus seemed to enable a separation between the digital and "real" self, where the digital self was thought of as an objectified persona created to make profit.



Although it may be seen as perfectly rational to separate one's personal and emotional self from the digital persona that has been created, this undoubtedly requires a lot from someone, and likely comes with a high risk of the lines to blur. When it comes to the actual boundaries between work and privacy, doing something in the digital realm, as briefly discussed with Skilbrei (see chapter 5.3.2), may nonetheless mean that the work penetrates even deeper into people's private lives. Without discussing this idea further, the notion that OnlyFans presents itself as a platform where one can display a distance between sex work and private life, seem to be relevant for how norms around sex as a commodity might be mediated by the digital realm. In other words, a digital platform such as OnlyFans appeared to make it easier to play out the neoliberal spirit, and the postfeminist empowerment discourse, on a surface level.

So, what does this mean for norms around sex as a commodity? As a counterargument to the critical radical feminist perspective, which claims that all commercial sex exploits women (eg. Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2014), a digital platform such as OnlyFans, can claim to only deal in what each woman chose to sell, without third party interference. With the development of a platform which arguably conforms to the postfeminist idealization of agency, and the neoliberal need for individual responsibility, the commodification of sex may be able to prosper in a more acceptable way.

As argued by Brents and Sanders (2010), the perceived respectability of sex workers may be traced back to the changing class profile of actors within the sex industry. Generally speaking, when people who would otherwise not engage in sex work, finds an attractive opportunity to commodify their sexuality online, a larger number of people are arguably working within an industry of commercial sex. In this sense, the commodification of sex may be considered more "normal". Instead of sex work being something which exists in a relatively hidden area, as a deviation from what is "normal", sex may increasingly be accepted as a commodity in our contemporary western society. This could be understood in line with Foucauldian perspective which claims that we live in a "society of normalization" (Foucault, 1986).

## 6.4 A change in norms around sex as a commodity

As seen in the analysis, there were relatively clear ideas as to how one should utilize their erotic capital in order to be successful on OnlyFans. When taking about an increased respectability for sex workers and a potential normalization of commercial sex in the digital

realm, it therefore seems relevant to discuss how ideal forms of commercial sex were expressed by content creators on the platform. The women who were interviewed for this study had all been economically successful on the platform and saw their success as a result of their own business skills and ability to navigate the platform. From an individual perspective, the women who were able to strategically navigate the market, and who actively could put the adequate price tag on the content they shared, seemed to be rewarded with a sense of respectability, and considered themselves as successful women.

Based on this, it can be argued that the influences of a digital platform such as OnlyFans (re)creates boundaries between “good” and “bad” women, as well as “good” and “bad” ways to use sex as a commodity. As further explained in chapter 4.2, Foucault looked at the subject as something one comes to be, as it is connected to and must relate to certain forms of power (Ugelvik, 2013). In line with the concept of disciplinary power, the structure of our society becomes incorporated in our sense of identity and self and creates the acting subject (Ibid.). While there may be spoken of an increased respectability of commercial sex on a platform such as OnlyFans, this respectability may not serve women in general but rather enforce a rigid box women are meant to fit into. In line with the story of female empowerment, a woman can use her sex as a commodity, but only if she does so of her own free will and presents herself as an agentic and empowered woman.

Despite content creators being free to choose which content to share, it could be argued that they are disciplined to “play by the rules”. Because the content that each creator produces is valued based on its economic exchange value in market space of OnlyFans, a lot of responsibility is arguably put on individual women to adapt to this market in order to feel and be (economically) successful. As seen in chapter 5.4 “personal boundaries”, the ability to maintain boundaries on the platform could be difficult, as one could be torn between wanting to make money, while also being “true to oneself”. Statements such as “if you exceed your boundary, the amount should be worth it”, can also be interpreted as a sense of individual responsibility towards knowing one’s own value in economic terms. From this perspective, a lot of pressure is arguably put on women to act in certain ways, which fits into Bay-Cheng's (2015) critical question of whether a new normative prescription of ideal womanhood, as promoted by postfeminism, simply offers yet another way to confine and control women’s behavior and position in society.

As Durham argued from a critical view on postfeminism; “The worth of a cultural expression is based on its exchange value in the market rather than what it can contribute to the cultural commons or social progress” (in Zaslow, 2009: 5). In other words, when looking back at the postfeminist story of female empowerment from a critical perspective, one could question whether liberal norms around female sexuality is truly serving women themselves to the same degree as they serve the ones who profit from having created the platform. The creation of new digital platforms, such as OnlyFans, are arguably driven by entrepreneurs who see an economic opportunity in their ideas, and within a capitalistic framework, the market ultimately determines which entrepreneurial ideas become successful. As Brents and Sanders (2010) argued, the market can exploit neoliberal policies which privileges individual responsibility and liberal norms around sex as a commodity. In other words, OnlyFans could be seen as a part of a wider mainstreaming of commercial sex (eg. Brents & Sanders, 2010), which takes advantage of women’s ideal of sexual agency.

The initial story of liberal women who take advantage of available technology can be said to meet the story of a neoliberal economy where disciplinary power dictates the way in which women are “allowed” to act as liberal subjects. From a critical perspective, this story could depict women as equally controlled and exploited as with previous forms of commercial sex, although through disciplinary power they are led to make decisions which are believed to be empowering on an individual level.

## 6.5 Norms and regulations

If norms around sex as a commodity are changing as a consequence of new digital developments and the creation of platforms such as OnlyFans, some question remains from a sociology of law perspective. For instance, what does this mean for our society and our view on the commodification of bodies, and how should the legal sphere relate to these apparent changes. Looking at how societal relations might affect the development of legal rules, decisions, and institutions (Mathiesen, 2001), it seems relevant to note that there might not be enough tension between what occurs on OnlyFans and current values in our contemporary western society. Other forms of sexual commerce, such as street prostitution is typically subject to heavy rights battles and various legal regulations (eg. Skilbrei & Holmström, 2016). One may ask why sex work on OnlyFans is not met with the same regulatory ambitions as other forms of commercial sex.

It is arguably difficult to regulate a digital platform which stretches globally, and one could suggest that regulating OnlyFans is unnecessary because there are no apparent physical dangers to the actors involved. On the other hand, legal regulation of sex work may not only have the function of protecting individuals, it can also be considered to have a “renovation function”, as explained by Mathiesen (2010). In other words, another reason why OnlyFans remains unregulated, might be because content creators on OnlyFans utilize sex as a commodity in a way which is considered normatively acceptable in our society. The way I see it, as new technological developments create new ways to engage in sexual commerce, sex as a commodity may become more normatively acceptable. From a norms perspective on law, changes in norms might contribute to a change in legal norms (Hydén, 2002). However, if the normative field that surrounds the phenomenon of OnlyFans can be said to reinforce its facilitation of sex as a commodity, such changes will unlikely occur.

As shown in the analysis, the content creators explained OnlyFans as a relatively favorable opportunity for them as women to make money. From a critical, perhaps radical feminist perspective, this could reflect a lack of optimism in women’s opportunities for independence and economic freedom in “regular society”. If sexualization and exposure of one’s “sexy body” supposedly is the main source of women’s capital and sense of empowerment, one may question whether the empowerment discourse of OnlyFans merely disguises a larger issue regarding women’s position and economic opportunities in our contemporary western society. The idea that girls or women who wish to be independent and free is thought to achieve this by exploiting their own erotic capital, may speak to such issues.

By rewarding women who conforms to social expectations of agency and responsibility, one arguably takes a sidestep from a feminist fight towards gender equality by accepting the sexualization of women. Through a platform such as OnlyFans, one could argue that women are disciplined into accepting their position as sexual objects, with the twist of personal agency. The recognition of how agency and responsibility has become highly valued in our contemporary western society, may in other words be considered an explanatory factor for how women make decisions which are ideal in terms of meeting these values, even if they are considered “controversial”.

From a sociology of law perspective, one could ask whether law should actively engage in the regulation of sex as a commodity in the digital realm. On one hand, changes in norms around sex as a commodity can be said to represent opportunities for women to utilize their

erotic capital for economic gain. On the other hand, as seen from a Foucauldian perspective, it can be argued that instead of offering women power, a platform such as OnlyFans only offers yet another way to (re)create a sexualized and objectified view on women.

## 6.6 Conclusions

Based on the findings of this study, and supported by existing literature, I have argued that norms surrounding sex as a commodity might be mediated by the development of a digital platforms such as OnlyFans. Based on how OnlyFans is organized and utilized, the digital realm seems to mediate some of the common “issues” between combining sex and money. As such, the digital may be considered a tool in the process of putting norms in motion. Because the digital realm makes it is easier to present stories such as that of female empowerment, it can be argued that the digital realm makes sex as a commodity more available to us as a society.

From a critical Foucauldian perspective, I have looked at how a neoliberal system may influence women’s actions in a way which supports the commodification of sex. Despite OnlyFans being represented as a liberating digital tool for people to take advantage of, it also correlates with a development that arguably appreciates and supports ideals such as a neoliberal rationality. By considering how the ideals of sexual agency and individual responsibility, which appeared to be expressed through OnlyFans, align with productive forces such as the economic system of neoliberalism, the idea that women in general are gaining increased liberty and empowerment through developments such as OnlyFans, may be contradicted. Instead, this new technology could be said to offer new ways to objectify women, and more generally present a change in our acceptance towards to commodification of individuals.

As argued by Brownsword (2017), technological developments can both contribute to our human liberty as they present new tools and things to do, as well as offer new ways to control and exploit our human liberty. Instead of automatically letting a capitalistic market force determine what becomes available to us, one could ask, in the spirit of Foucault, what if everything was different? Our technological developments have skyrocketed during the last decades, and it is questionable whether we are really able to recognize how each one of them influences our societies. From a normative perspective on law, if current norms around sex as a commodity aligns with legal norms, there is no sense of urgency to make any changes. And

if a platform such as OnlyFans fits so well into the structure of neoliberalism, it can be understood to support it. In other words, from a Foucauldian perspective, we potentially allow powerful influences such as that of neoliberalism to normatively influence our society.

**Word count:** *30 211*

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# Appendix I: Information Letter and Form of Consent

(Norwegian version)

## Vil du delta i forskningsprosjektet «OnlyFans»

Dette er et spørsmål til deg om å delta i et forskningsprosjekt hvor formålet er å forske på kvinners opplevelser og forståelser av den digitale plattformen OnlyFans. I dette skrivet gir vi deg informasjon om målene for prosjektet og hva deltakelse vil innebære for deg.

### Formål

I dette mastergradsprosjektet er målet å gå i dybden på kvinners opplevelser og forståelser rundt egen bruk av plattformen OnlyFans, som «content creators». Det vil spesielt fokuseres på forholdet mellom kropp, seksualitet og penger. Fra et retts sosiologisk perspektiv, vil det forskes på hvordan kvinner forholder seg til salg av seksualiserte bilder og videoer gjennom abonnementsiden OnlyFans. Hvilke muligheter nettsiden presenterer, hvordan kvinner selv ser på disse mulighetene og hvilke eventuelle barrierer som er med på å forme bruken av plattformen er blant annet relevante spørsmål.

### Hvem er ansvarlig for forskningsprosjektet?

Institutt for kriminologi og retts sosiologi ved Universitetet i Oslo er ansvarlige for prosjektet.

### Hvorfor får du spørsmål om å delta?

Ettersom formålet med denne studien er å undersøke plattformen OnlyFans fra kvinnelige «content creators» side, er informanter som fyller dette kriteriet spurt om å delta. Det er også et kriterium at personen hovedsakelig baserer sin profil på fremstillinger av egen kropp og seksualitet.

### Hva innebærer det for deg å delta?

Hvis du velger å delta i prosjektet, innebærer det at du blir invitert til intervju. Dette vil ta omtrentlig en time. Spørsmålene vil være åpne og utforskende, og kan eksempelvis være hvordan du ser på deling av innhold på en betalt nettside som OnlyFans vs. andre plattformer som Instagram. Det vil tas notater under intervjuet i tillegg til at intervjuet tas opp med digital lydopptaker.

### Det er frivillig å delta

Det er frivillig å delta i prosjektet. Hvis du velger å delta, kan du når som helst trekke samtykket tilbake uten å oppgi noen grunn. Alle dine personopplysninger vil da bli slettet. Det vil ikke ha noen negative konsekvenser for deg hvis du ikke vil delta eller senere velger å trekke deg.

### Ditt personvern – hvordan vi oppbevarer og bruker dine opplysninger

Vi vil bare bruke opplysningene om deg til formålene vi har fortalt om i dette skrivet. Vi behandler opplysningene konfidensielt og i samsvar med personvernregelverket. Det er bare masterstudent Monja Halvorsen som vil ha tilgang til intervjudataen og dine opplysninger. I transkriberingen av lydopptaket anonymiseres opplysninger som kan identifisere deg som

person. Etter dette slettes minnebrikken. Dermed er det ingen opplysninger som kan knyttes til deg som person som følger med videre i prosessen med analyse og publisering.

### **Hva skjer med opplysningene dine når vi avslutter forskningsprosjektet?**

Prosjektet avsluttes når oppgaven er godkjent, noe som etter planen er 15. juni 2022. Datamaterialet skal anonymiseres så fort det transkriberes.

### **Hva gir oss rett til å behandle personopplysninger om deg?**

Vi behandler opplysninger om deg basert på ditt samtykke.

På oppdrag fra institutt for kriminologi og rettssosiologi ved Universitetet i Oslo har NSD – Norsk senter for forskningsdata AS vurdert at behandlingen av personopplysninger i dette prosjektet er i samsvar med personvernregelverket.

### **Dine rettigheter**

Så lenge du kan identifiseres i datamaterialet, har du rett til:

- innsyn i hvilke opplysninger vi behandler om deg, og å få utlevert en kopi av opplysningene
- å få rettet opplysninger om deg som er feil eller misvisende
- å få slettet personopplysninger om deg
- å sende klage til Datatilsynet om behandlingen av dine personopplysninger

Hvis du har spørsmål til studien, eller ønsker å vite mer om eller benytte deg av dine rettigheter, ta kontakt med:

- Institutt for kriminologi og rettssosiologi, Monja Halvorsen (student), [REDACTED]
- Institutt for kriminologi og rettssosiologi, Peter Scharff Smith (veileder), [REDACTED]
- Roger Markgraf-Bye, [REDACTED], [personvernombud@uio.no](mailto:personvernombud@uio.no)

Hvis du har spørsmål knyttet til NSD sin vurdering av prosjektet, kan du ta kontakt med:

- NSD – Norsk senter for forskningsdata AS på epost ([personverntjenester@nsd.no](mailto:personverntjenester@nsd.no)) eller på telefon: 55 58 21 17.

Med vennlig hilsen

*Peter Scharff Smith*  
(Forsker/veileder)

*Monja Halvorsen*  
(Mastergradsstudent)

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## **Samtykkeerklæring**

Jeg har mottatt og forstått informasjon om prosjektet «*Onlyfans*» og har fått anledning til å stille spørsmål. Jeg samtykker til:

- å delta på intervju

Jeg samtykker til at mine opplysninger behandles frem til prosjektet er avsluttet

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(Signert av prosjektdeltaker, dato)

## Appendix II: Interview guide

# Interview guide (English)

Innledning: Presentere meg selv, lydopptak, anonymisering, taushetsplikt etc. Informere om at målet for intervjuet er å få innsikt i hva fysisk aktivitet, og spesielt gangsteryoga betyr for deg som innsatt.

Før intervjuet informer om: 1) Formålet med studien 2) Anonymitet 3) Hvordan lydopptak blir ivare tatt 4) Innsyn i egne opplysninger 5) Underskrift samtykkeskjema

### A. Background

- 1) How old are you and where are you from?
- 2) Do you study or work? Or have any work experience?

### B. ONLYFANS

- 3) Are you currently using OF, for how long?
- 4) Can you explain what OF is in your own words?
- 5) What kind of content do you post on OF?
- 6) What is/was your biggest motivation for using OF?
- 7) How do people find you on OF?
- 8) Are you anonymous on OF?

### C. WORK

- 9) Would you call your use of OF your job?
- 10) How do you feel about the definition sexwork for OF?
- 11) Do you make enough money to live on from OF? Or do you have a job on the side?
- 12) What do you think is the biggest difference between sharing content for free, like on IG, and sharing it for profit, like on OF?

### D. Feminism and criticism

- 13) What would you say is the general perception of OF where you live? Stigma, prejudice?
- 14) (focus on different forms of feminism) What is your association/relationship with feminism?
- 15) In the media there are both representations of OnlyFans as negative for the “liberation of women”, similarly to prostitution and porn, as well as more positive views on the opportunities it presents to women who can use their female bodies to make money. What would you say a platform like OnlyFans presents for women?

### E. Limits and boundaries

- 16) Have you decided on any boundaries for what you will do or share for money?

- 17) Are boundaries something you find important?
- 18) Do you have the impression that other girls on OF care about boundaries the same way you do?
- F. Prices
- 19) How do you decide how much to take for a subscription or individual sale?
- 20) How much would you say money can determine what you are willing to share?
- G. Digital world
- 21) Would you be willing to share as much of your body if the digital world didn't exist?
- 22) Do you think the digital world makes it easier to share content of yourself? Why?
- 23) Do you feel like OnlyFans or other social media has changed your relationship to your own body?
- 24) Do you feel like you have the same amount of ownership over your body as you did before OF?
- H. The Buyers
- 25) Have you made any physical contact with your subscribers?
- 26) How close do you feel like you get to them?
- 27) I've understood that people can request content individually with direct messages, what is your experiences with this? Do you get requests you don't want to deliver on?
- I. OF and regulations
- 28) How do you feel about OF taking a percentage of what you earn on the platform?
- 29) Do you personally feel like there are strict regulations on OF? Like the "acceptable use policy"?
- 30) If it is no longer a possibility to use OF, would you miss it and would you do something else instead?
- J. Finishing...
- 31) What do you say if someone else is curious about starting an OF?
- 32) How long do you think you will continue to use OF?
- 33) Is there anything about the way OF is perceived in the media that you disagree with and would want to point out as wrong etc.?



# Appendix III: Approval from NSD

15.09.2022, 09:35

Meldeskjema for behandling av personopplysninger

[Meldeskjema](#) / [OnlyFans - kvinnelig entreprenørskap på bekostning av kvinnelig frigjøring...](#) / Vurdering

## Vurdering

**Referansenummer**

594910

**Type**

Standard

**Dato**

27.06.2022

**Prosjekttittel**

OnlyFans - kvinnelig entreprenørskap på bekostning av kvinnelig frigjøring?

**Behandlingsansvarlig institusjon**

Universitetet i Oslo / Det juridiske fakultet / Institutt for kriminologi og rettssosiologi

**Prosjektansvarlig**

Peter Scharff Smith

**Student**

Monja Halvorsen

**Prosjektperiode**

01.09.2021 - 20.09.2022

**Kategorier personopplysninger**

Alminnelige

Særlige

[Meldeskjema](#) 

**Kommentar**

OM VURDERINGEN

Personverntjenester har en avtale med institusjonen du forsker eller studerer ved. Denne avtalen innebærer at vi skal gi deg råd slik at behandlingen av personopplysninger i prosjektet ditt er lovlig etter personvernregelverket.

Personverntjenester har nå vurdert den planlagte behandlingen av personopplysninger. Vår vurdering er at behandlingen er lovlig, hvis den gjennomføres slik den er beskrevet i meldeskjemaet med dialog og vedlegg.

**VIKTIG INFORMASJON TIL DEG**

Du må lagre, sende og sikre dataene i tråd med retningslinjene til din institusjon. Dette betyr at du må bruke leverandører for spørreskjema, skylagring, videosamtale o.l. som institusjonen din har avtale med. Vi gir generelle råd rundt dette, men det er institusjonens egne retningslinjer for informasjonssikkerhet som gjelder.

**TYPE OPPLYSNINGER OG VARIGHET**

Prosjektet vil behandle alminnelige personopplysninger, særlige kategorier av personopplysninger om seksuelle forhold eller orientering frem til 20.09.2022.

**LOVLIG GRUNNLAG**

Prosjektet vil innhente samtykke fra de registrerte til behandlingen av personopplysninger. Vår vurdering er at prosjektet legger opp til et samtykke i samsvar med kravene i art. 4 nr. 11 og 7, ved at det er en frivillig, spesifikk, informert og utvetydig bekreftelse, som kan dokumenteres, og som den registrerte kan trekke tilbake.

For alminnelige personopplysninger vil lovlig grunnlag for behandlingen være den registrertes samtykke, jf. personvernforordningen art. 6 nr. 1 a.

Behandlingen av særlige kategorier av personopplysninger er basert på uttrykkelig samtykke fra den registrerte, jf. personvernforordningen art. 6 nr. 1 a og art. 9 nr. 2 a.

**PERSONVERNPRINSIPPER**

Personverntjenester vurderer at den planlagte behandlingen av personopplysninger vil følge prinsippene i personvernforordningen:

- om lovlighet, rettferdighet og åpenhet (art. 5.1 a), ved at de registrerte får tilfredsstillende informasjon om og samtykker til behandlingen
- formålsbegrensning (art. 5.1 b), ved at personopplysninger samles inn for spesifikke, uttrykkelig angitte og berettigede formål, og ikke viderebehandles til nye uforenlige formål
- dataminimering (art. 5.1 c), ved at det kun behandles opplysninger som er adekvate, relevante og nødvendige for formålet med

prosjektet

- lagringsbegrensning (art. 5.1 e), ved at personopplysningene ikke lagres lengre enn nødvendig for å oppfylle formålet.

#### DE REGISTRERTES RETTIGHETER

Vi vurderer at informasjonen om behandlingen som de registrerte vil motta oppfyller lovens krav til form og innhold, jf. art. 12.1 og art. 13.

Så lenge de registrerte kan identifiseres i datamaterialet vil de ha følgende rettigheter: innsyn (art. 15), retting (art. 16), sletting (art. 17), begrensning (art. 18) og dataportabilitet (art. 20).

Vi minner om at hvis en registrert tar kontakt om sine rettigheter, har behandlingsansvarlig institusjon plikt til å svare innen en måned.

#### FØLG DIN INSTITUSJONS RETNINGSLINJER

Personverntjenester legger til grunn at behandlingen oppfyller kravene i personvernforordningen om riktighet (art. 5.1 d), integritet og konfidensialitet (art. 5.1 f) og sikkerhet (art. 32).

Ved bruk av databehandler (spørreskjemaleverandør, skylagring, videosamtale o.l.) må behandlingen oppfylle kravene til bruk av databehandler, jf. art 28 og 29. Bruk leverandører som din institusjon har avtale med.

For å forsikre dere om at kravene oppfylles, må prosjektansvarlig følge interne retningslinjer/rådføre dere med behandlingsansvarlig institusjon.

#### MELD VESENTLIGE ENDRINGER

Dersom det skjer vesentlige endringer i behandlingen av personopplysninger, kan det være nødvendig å melde dette til oss ved å oppdatere meldeskjemaet. Før du melder inn en endring, oppfordrer vi deg til å lese om hvilken type endringer det er nødvendig å melde:

<https://www.nsd.no/personverntjenester/fyll-ut-meldeskjema-for-personopplysninger/melde-endringer-i-meldeskjema>

Du må vente på svar fra oss før endringen gjennomføres.

#### OPPFØLGING AV PROSJEKTET

Vi vil følge opp ved planlagt avslutning for å avklare om behandlingen av personopplysningene er avsluttet i tråd med den behandlingen som er dokumentert.

Kontaktperson hos oss:

Lykke til med prosjektet!