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“I’d be Mortified if Someone Thought I was Putting my Bum Online for Some Fucking Gucci Sandals”: Liminality, Ownership and Identity – A Case-study of Sex Work on OnlyFans

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Abstract This research explores the nuances of ownership involved in online sex work and investigates the liminal nature of sex work. This article details a case study of a British woman using the OnlyFans platform to post explicit adult content. This case study is framed within the literature discussing both the mainstreaming of sex work and stigmatisation attributed to sex workers, maintained by heteronormative gender scripts and rape culture in a digital era. Through multiple narrative-style interviews, an in-depth case study exploration was conducted into the experiences of an online sex worker, using the pseudonym Ria, during the 2020 Coronavirus outbreak and subsequent lockdown in England. Two key themes of liminality and ownership emerged. The overarching theme of liminality focuses on the conditions of an in-between space, and encapsulated Ria’s experience of online sex work. The theme of ownership concerns Ria’s physical content on the OnlyFans platform, extending to her ownership over her body in the online context. This case study has captured a snapshot of the ways in which online sex workers using the OnlyFans platform may experience a variety of liminal states - exploring links to the ways in which sex workers are perceived in society and how this impacts their ownership of their content, their identities and ultimately their bodies.

Key Words: OnlyFans, online sex work, sex worker identity, liminality, ownership.

Introduction

The aim of this research was to investigate the liminal nature of online sex work through exploration of a case-study experience told by an adult using a sexual content subscription website. Through multiple semi-structured interviews, an in-depth case study exploration was conducted into the experiences of an online sex worker, using the pseudonym Ria, during the 2020 Coronavirus outbreak and subsequent lockdown in England.

Drawing on the combination of literature about the mainstreaming of sex work which has facilitated opportunities for online adult content work, stigma, and legislation around content as a framework for analysis, this article explores two key themes that emerged as findings from the case study – liminality and ownership.

OnlyFans is a London, United Kingdom (UK) based company launched in 2016. It provides a social media-like platform for content creators to post media that subscribers will pay to view. It currently has around 30 million users and 450,000 content creators. While not limited solely to adult content, this is arguably its central and most acclaimed use (Tillman, 2020). Creators promote their page to gain subscribers and may take additional payments for extra content at a subscriber's request. The scope of the platform is global and includes international payment gateways, meaning that a creator can receive payments transnationally. Despite this, there is still no application and it must be accessed via an internet browser. As content can be of a sexual nature, there have been concerns about the protection of data and how it is stored: the OnlyFans website states that personal data is stored within General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR). However, once personal data has gone outside of the EU the individual loses the protection of GDPR (OnlyFans, 2020). This provides context for the global reach that content creators' media may achieve, as well as the implications on how their data and content is protected within this framework.

This research focuses on a woman engaging in online sex work due to the fact that most, but not all, people involved in sex work are women. The number of sex workers in the UK is estimated to be between 60,000 and 80,000 with roughly 95% being women (House of Commons, 2016). Additionally, the majority of webcam sex workers are women, with most starting between the age of 20 and 30 (Hester et al, 2019). Due to this framing, how the concepts in this research impact male and transgender online sex workers fall outside of the bounds of the current research parameters.

Literature Review

This research explores the nuances of ownership involved in online sex work through a case study of a woman in her mid-twenties, residing in England, using the OnlyFans platform to post explicit adult content. Literature discussing the mainstreaming of sex work, liminality, stigmatisation attributed to sex workers maintained by heteronormative gender scripts, and rape culture in a digital era, provide a useful framework for this exploration.

The Mainstreaming of Sex Work

Mainstreaming of sex work describes the expansion in size of the sex industry into various aspects of life in the pursuit of further commodification and profit, in keeping with neo-liberal ideologies. The use of corporeal bodies, physicality and sexuality as modes of

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commercialisation in all aspects of consumerism has meant that sex is becoming more visible, more explicit, and more accessible to broader groups of consumers (McNair, 1996; Attwood, 2006; Brents & Sanders, 2010). While this has been aided by a neo-liberal economy, the profession remains stigmatised in various spaces in British society and globally.

Neo-liberal regulation surrounds sex work (Brents and Sanders, 2010); indeed, the rhetoric of free market and individual freedom dominates Western societies and has influenced the regulation of morality and sexuality, encouraging the economic and social integration of sexual commerce. Brents and Sanders (2010) described processes that facilitate the mainstreaming of sex work. The first is ‘mainstreaming’ itself, for example into businesses that do not directly sell sex, such as OnlyFans. The second is ‘economic mainstreaming’: this involves processes whereby sex businesses adapt to look and perform like ‘ordinary’ businesses not attached to stigmatised productions like selling sex. Finally, ‘social mainstreaming’ describes the shift in cultural attitudes toward the acceptability of sexual expression as legitimate commerce – ‘sex sells’.

Mainstreaming of commercial sex is a direct consequence of wider social changes and the acceptability of bodies as commodities. Late capitalist mass consumption fostered a ‘pornographication’ of culture, liberalisation of sexual attitudes and more equal attitudes towards intimacy, with added disposability of relationships (McNair, 1996; Attwood, 2006; Brents & Sanders, 2010). However, there remains social ambivalence and anxiety about the ‘specialness’ of sex (Jackson & Scott, 2004). Despite evidence of liberalisation of sexual attitudes and increased integration of sex work into mainstream society, there still remains entrenchment of heteronormative, traditional gender roles and values in British society, which form the basis of stigmatisation of sex workers.

Additionally, mainstreaming has allowed for an increase in accessible online platforms for sex work. Development of modern communication technologies being used to support, replace or reconfigure sexual encounters is becoming more commonplace in ordinary people’s everyday lives (Attwood, 2006). The internet offers a new market for sex work with additional and increased opportunities for individuals to control (or partially control) the means of production through self-produced material (Wilkinson, 2017). Mainstreaming of the sex industry – paired with the infiltration of the internet into the majority of homes – has increased accessibility to online platforms which can foster the formation of liminal, online sex worker identities.

Liminal Space

Theories of liminality and liminal space are useful for exploring experiences of transitions from one state to another or from one reality to another. Liminality denotes a middle state or a phase whereby an individual transitions from one social status to another (Turner, 1969) – it is during this middle phase that individuals are simultaneously understood as being ‘no longer’ and also ‘not yet’ (Wels et al, 2011). The concept has clear connotations of marginality which is often associated with sex work (Madge & O’Connor, 2005; Wels et al, 2011). The following paragraphs address various layers of liminality that deserve consideration: the liminality of conducting sex work in cyber/space; the liminality of a marginalised status due to stigmatisation of women engaged in sex work; and the liminality of the adult-content creator’s ownership.

Liminality Online

Madge and O'Connor (2005) discussed how cyber space and geographical space coexist to form an interconnected, hybrid cyber/space that combines the virtually real and the actually real. Cyber/space can be explored by looking at online embodiment which allows individuals to perform multiple and different identities, these may become progressively fluid, manipulable and constructed (Madge & O'Connor, 2005). Individual's embodied identities are a result of their interactions with the world, usually communicated through their bodies (Schultze, 2014); this is challenged online as identity performances are 'untethered' from the user's body. Madge and O'Connor (2005) argue that new constructed identities are enabled by a disembodied nature of communication combined with anonymity that allows individuals to be accepted on the basis of their words, rather than bodily markers. However, this is not always the case, particularly with online sex workers – the nature of their work means that they must reveal their bodily markers to their audience.

OnlyFans adult-content creator's experiences of sex work occur predominantly in the online space, with the exceptions of those who also work in the industry in a physical space. Therefore, it is important to explore this experience in virtual spaces. A liminal zone of cyberspace exists that is not only virtual, it is also corporeal; virtually real and actually real spaces merge, ideas and structures affect individuals online thus the norms of sexuality are apparent in online identity construction (Eklund, 2011). Within the intersection of technology and socio-cultural ideas, we see identities of individuals in cyberspace being created and maintained in the eyes of their audience (Anarbaeva, 2016). With this in mind, stereotypes and stigmatisation of sex workers must also be addressed as these assumptions inevitably shape virtual interactions.

Sex Work Stigma

Liminality also manifests in the world of online sex work through content creators' experiences of stigma. As society changes, non-marital sexual activities are not as prohibited; however, there are forms of sexual contact or activity where men are more dominant in defining the nature of such and the social arrangements in which they are embedded (Walby, 1989). A central feature of patriarchy is prevention of women from exploiting their erotic capital for their own economic and social gains (Hakim, 2010). Therefore, behaviour that falls outside of heteronormative intimate relationships conducted by women, such as sex work, is stigmatised. Despite social media's association with innovation and social progress, gendered power relations that shape offline spaces are mirrored and replicated online (Sills et al, 2016).

Stigma is universal in sex work; however, it varies in intensity, being generally more severe in street-based sex work, and can remain persistent after a person has left sex work (Weitzer, 2018). Often, this emerges as whore stigma (Pheterson, 1993; Brents & Sanders, 2010; Benoit et al, 2020). The nature of sex work contravenes well-established gendered ideologies that serve to maintain dichotomous conceptions of gender and norms about sexuality transgressing committed heterosexual relationships (Pheterson, 1993; Benoit et al, 2020). Paradoxically, the sex industry relies on its transgressive-ness: the demand for sexual commerce is often based on its marginalised status (Brents & Sanders, 2010). This means that it is difficult for sex workers to go about sex work as a regular job without having significant social impact. Despite the mainstreaming of sex work and sexual liberation extending into neo-liberal concepts such as free market individualism, those engaging in sex work, utilising new online possibilities, teeter on a threshold between structural marginalisation maintained by stigmatisation and the integration of the profession into day-to-day life.

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Arguably, traditional gender roles in societies dominated by patriarchal ideals are a contributor to the stigmatisation of sex workers such as the Madonna/whore dichotomy, conveying polarised perceptions of women as either ‘good’, chaste and pure (Madonnas), or as ‘bad’, promiscuous and seductive (whores) (Bareket et al, 2018). This is used to justify which women ‘deserve’ to be objectified, placing the value of women on their sexual pleasure alone and reducing them to instruments existing only to fulfil male desires (Bareket et al, 2018). Adult-content creators using online platforms like OnlyFans may find themselves boxed into the whore category, with their identity reduced to their role as a sex worker.

This application of a fixed sex worker identity also impacts attitudes towards the content that online sex workers produce and who ‘owns’ it once it is online. This may therefore reduce the level of ownership individuals using OnlyFans have over their content.

Ownership

Ownership concerns the control and agency over the content that is produced for and distributed on OnlyFans. Whilst it is widely assumed that online sex workers have agency and control over the type of content they distribute to their subscribers (Wilkinson, 2017). At the time of writing, OnlyFans lacked features which meant that creators could not always control or trace what happened to their content once it was posted online. They were, for example, unable to restrict screen captures. Consequently, there is a risk of explicit content being shared without the creator’s consent. OnlyFans does include Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) notice and takedown procedures if ‘property’ is redistributed to third-party sites. However, OnlyFans also mentions that removal time is on a case-by-case basis (OnlyFans.com, 2020). Therefore, the ownership of the content the creators produce may also enter a liminal state once posted.

Additionally, there is a failure to consider a range of abusive practices that result from non-consensual distribution of private sexual images (McGlynn et al, 2017). Narrow legal definitions of sexual material mean that there are restrictions on what would be considered for prosecution (Raffaella Huber, 2018). Therefore, redistribution of OnlyFans content creator’s images, even with malicious intent, may instead fall under infringement of intellectual property rights. This draws similarities to cases whereby sexual assaults against sex workers have been deemed as theft of services rather than a personal violation (Michels, 2009). This perception is facilitated by the mainstreaming and neo-liberalisation of sex work; as bodies are increasingly viewed and used as commodities (Brents and Sanders, 2010; Wilkinson, 2017), sex workers’ bodies are reduced to a product for transactional purposes.

Arguably, misogyny and financial gain are motivating factors for distributing images without consent, thus exemplifying a wider pattern of abuse against women (Henry & Powell, 2016). There have been developments in UK legislation that see sex workers as vulnerable to sexual victimisation and as individuals that are able to give and withhold consent (Beyens & Lievens, 2016). However, when sex work is conducted exclusively online, creators exist in a liminal space whereby their consent is seemingly not as clear cut due to lacking ‘physical’ harm. Therefore, stereotypes and stigma around sex workers feed into rape culture, amalgamating to form a gendered understanding of the layers of adult-content creator’s ownership.

Summary

Mainstreaming of sex work has increased opportunities for individuals to create and sell adult-content by opening up the market for online platforms such as OnlyFans. The occurrence of

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this in an online space can in itself create liminal spaces; it also facilitates the creation of liminal online identities for sex workers presenting in cyberspace. This is intertwined with stereotypes and stigmatisation of sex workers relating to how OnlyFans content creators are responded to by others as well as their levels of ownership over the content that they produce – which also features elements of liminality. This will be demonstrated through the case-study as Ria explores her apprehensions linked to liminal lockdown space, her levels of ownership at various stages of posting her content, as well as her ownership over her own sex worker identity.

Methodology and Method

This research was approved by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee: Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Greenwich. Selection criteria for participants required them to be currently using or to have used the OnlyFans platform to post adult-content and to be English speaking. As the nature of this research relates to online sexual content sharing, there was an additional requirement for them to be over eighteen years old. The research participant wished to be referred to by her chosen pseudonym, Ria.

Ria was introduced to myself through a mutual acquaintance who had discussed my line of enquiry with her. Given the Covid-19 restrictions, this method of recruitment was particularly useful as building rapport and conveying genuineness was limited to online interactions, which felt more difficult to achieve than in person. The initial contact was able to help guarantee my legitimacy which is vital when conducting socially sensitive research (Browne, 2005). It was ensured that Ria was able to give clear and well-informed consent by explaining thoroughly the aims and process of the research.

The research implemented two semi-structured narrative-style interviews to collect rich and detailed data about Ria's experiences. Interviews were conducted virtually to ensure ease of access, each lasting roughly 60 minutes and were recorded with permission. Interviews were used to form a case study. Case studies allow for focus on social contexts and actor's life worlds in their own words (Daly, 2018). This line of enquiry felt fitting with the feminist epistemology of the research, giving value to Ria's story as the central form of data. Although case studies are limited spatially and temporally, they enable in depth exploration of the meanings and explanations that an actor has of a situation (Daly, 2018). The temporal space is a pertinent factor of this research as much of Ria's experience occurs within the unprecedented lockdown enforced due to the Coronavirus outbreak – therefore, it is appropriate for a case study exploration. The ability to conduct more than one interview during the lockdown period meant how Ria's thoughts and story adapted over the course of the research could be captured.

Adopting a narrative approach to semi-structured interviews allowed for emphasizing certain aspects of Ria's experience whilst simultaneously provoking narrative. This means that interviews were predominantly interviewee-led – the flexibility found in this style of interview is beneficial to research into individual subjective experiences as it allows interviewees to speak freely about experiences and perceptions (Kyale, cited from Stanley, 2018). Additionally, narrative stories can reflect both structure and agency as they are the outcome of individual creativity while being simultaneously socially structured because social positioning and experience make particular types of discourses available (Fleetwood, 2015). This therefore aids in understanding how individuals' view of experiences is shaped by structural factors. Naturally, each OnlyFans adult-content creators' experience will differ – factors such as

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gender, sexuality, ability, race, and age will mould varying experiences and thereby warrant further exploration.

Analysis

During the analysis, it was acknowledged that both Ria and I would have a subjective influence on the research process; therefore, the findings should be considered a result of synthesised perspectives from both parties (Darawesheh, 2014). Throughout the analysis, I reflected on whether my interpretation would accurately reflect and be faithful to Ria's account. It was important to consider the context and make reflections on assumptions and personal experiences that may influence the analysis, particularly as discussion of sex work can be subject to varying societal norms regarding sexual behaviour based on sub-cultures, times and geographies (Ashton et al, 2019). I offered Ria the option to read the completed paper and feedback to aid in the reflection and to promote transparency.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and anonymised by removing any identifying factors to maintain confidentiality. A thematic coding process was implemented based on a combination of a priori based on a review of the relevant literature, and en vivo coding based on Ria's work. Transcripts were read thoroughly, broken down and categorised to identify areas of significance (Bryman, 2012). These were subsequently used for analysis and linked back to the aforementioned conceptual frameworks around liminal space, stigma, and stereotypes about sex workers (Turner 1969; Goffman, 1963; Benoit et al, 2020). Two intertwining themes formed as the analytical result – liminality and ownership.

Results and Analysis

Background Context

Ria is in her mid-twenties, living with her family in the West-Midlands, UK. At the start of the interview process, Ria was furloughed from her full-time job at a call centre due to the Coronavirus outbreak and conditions of lockdown in the UK. This also meant that she was unable to work at her part time job as a dancer at a strip-club. She signed up for OnlyFans at the start of lockdown in March 2020 due to the financial impact of this and concern around paying off debts. At this time, OnlyFans saw a 75% increase in model sign-ups in April 2020 as unemployment simultaneously increased (López, 2020). Economic pressures exacerbated by lockdown have been identified as a push factor for women to begin engaging or re-engage with sex work (Yasseri, 2021). Ria had identified this as a personal motivating factor herself. She had been creating content for roughly one month when the first interview was conducted.

Themes

Through the two interviews with Ria, two key themes emerged. The overarching theme is liminality: the conditions of an in-between space encapsulate Ria's experience of online sex work. Secondly is the theme of ownership which concerns Ria's content once it is placed online as well as how this extends to her ownership over her body and consent in the online context. Enmeshed within the two is Ria's sex worker identity; there is an indication that she experiences liminality and a lack of ownership over how and when others perceive her and her OnlyFans identity.

Liminality

Liminality of Lockdown

One layer of liminality that encapsulates this research is the national lockdown due to COVID-19. During this time, the government had to re-assess rules and regulations enforced upon society to keep people, and the economy, 'safe'. In the UK, many people not deemed as 'key workers' were placed on furlough, restrictions were enforced on socialising and businesses had to close. This period of lockdown will have served as a liminal space for many people no longer working – existing in limbo, waiting for a return to 'normal'.

Liminal space can be associated with sex work for Ria both before lockdown and before she moved on to online sex work. In the first conversation with Ria, we talked about her working life outside of OnlyFans. She explained that she previously tried stripping full time but found it difficult to distinguish between stripping and life outside of it, "It was affecting me mentally because I was struggling to realise what's actually reality and what's not." Although she had continued working part-time at the strip-club before lockdown, people became more aware of her engagement in sex work once she started OnlyFans due to the need to promote on social media platforms to gain subscribers. Ria recognised that sharing her perceived deviation from socially prescribed norms around sexuality publicly on social media was likely to gain attention. However, this may have been exacerbated due to lockdown conditions allowing people to spend an increased amount of time online, interacting with each other. She anticipated that this would occur to a lesser extent once life returned to normal, "When everything goes back to reality, everyone will calm down about it, it'll be fine." Not only does this speak to the liminality experienced in lockdown by referencing a return to 'reality' where everyone can go back to work as normal, it also suggests that there is a disposition to be dismissive toward any perceived transgression from gendered norms because her online sex work is liminal.

Liminality of Online Space

Online spaces allow for individuals to perform multiple fluid, constructed and manipulated identities (Madge & O'Connor, 2005). This is enabled by a disembodied nature of communication combined with anonymity whereby individuals are accepted on the basis of their words (Eklund, 2011). Ria hinted at this constructed identity when discussing the differences between online sex work and working in the strip club.

With stripping you're not hiding behind your phone, so you do have to be a bit of an actress. Whereas when it's on your phone you could say anything, and that person doesn't *really* know who you are anyway.

Adult-content creators on OnlyFans may experience using the platform in this liminal way – transforming their space and self periodically to produce content and interact with subscribers. This layer of liminality around self-presentation online to strangers may cause internal conflicts when online spaces and personhood are converging with the offline reality.

Convergence of online/offline

In the follow up interview with Ria, the liminality of lockdown as a safety net became even more apparent as she prepared to go back to work in the call centre. Lockdown allowed for a space that provided an increased amount of time to dedicate to starting her OnlyFans account but also for a space in which her choice to engage in online sex work was not influenced by

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her having to go into work every day and interact with people who would be aware of her creating content for OnlyFans. A liminal space was created whereby any negative social reaction to her decision would not be immediately confronted in the physical space. In the following quote, she implied that she may have reached a different decision without this safe space.

Lockdown happening is probably the thing that made me start OnlyFans because I knew I wasn't gonna be working. I knew I wasn't gonna have to see anyone when I did it.

Additionally, Ria implied in the following quote that 'hiding' behind a screen added a protective layer to her engagement in online sex work during the lockdown period, stating:

I think with lockdown, cause I'm in the comfort of my own home, my own bedroom, like I don't have to speak to anyone face to face, it's like a completely different atmosphere to, like a strip club where you've gotta be face-to-face, half naked with somebody, you're just hiding behind your phone. You're in your little safety bubble and like, now I'm having to go back to reality, it's like someone's popping my little OnlyFans bubble.

Here, the 'reality' that is implied by Ria is the return to face-to-face interactions outside of lockdown and furlough conditions. This supports that her involvement in online sex work under lockdown conditions had not felt like a 'real world' experience. There is an implied tension between the safety of liminality and the awareness of stigmatisation that may occur in public, which was easy to reject during the lockdown period.

The perceived liminality of Ria's work on OnlyFans acted as a buffer against stigma at her 'conventional' workplace which can be seen in the notion of her safe OnlyFans 'bubble' bursting when she was no longer able to remain 'hidden' behind a screen. During the interviews, she made reference to being confronted by other peoples' opinions in person. The following statement was made in relation to returning to work at the call-centre and suggested that she anticipated negative reactions from co-workers based on stigmatisation.

[...] Because I wasn't seeing anybody, I was like fuck people's opinions, I don't give a shit, like I really don't care. And now I'm going back to reality, I'm like: Oh God... I'm gonna have to listen to some people's opinions to my face.

Once she returned to the call centre, she perceived that she may go through a status shift socially – a signifier of liminal space (Turner, 1969) and often synonymous with sex work which exists on the margins of traditional society (Wels et al, 2011). Paradoxically, Ria did not mention fear around returning to the strip-club if this became an option. Perhaps because this exists within the same sphere as OnlyFans or that, as previously mentioned, she found it hard to distinguish from reality whilst stripping before lockdown. Gendered norms and whore stigma influence how Ria is perceived by other people and sometimes impact how they interact with her. Due to the nature of the labels applied to her for engaging in sex work, she may experience reduced ownership over when she chooses to embody her sex worker identity versus when this is applied to her by other people.

Madonna/whore Identities

Ria's ownership of her identity when she is not engaging with sex work relating to OnlyFans may be compromised due to assumptions about sex workers that accompany whore stigma

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such as assumed consent. This may not always involve sexual encounters but may extend to individuals making her feel uncomfortable on the premise that she is a sex worker and thus not entitled to reject any encounter. This entitlement was emphasised when Ria explained that the majority of negative online interactions occur with people who she denies free content to: “It is usually people that feel a bit rejected that give me shit.” She touches on ideas that her personhood is rejected because of her use of OnlyFans, “It doesn’t then give people the right to say whatever the fuck they want to you... I’m still a human being.” Dismissal that she is a person existing beyond her sex worker identity highlights the impact of whore stigma as a label that reduces sex workers from a usual person to a discounted one (Goffman, 1963). Contrastingly, Ria explained that some people had responded with negative judgement until they discovered how much she was earning:

As soon as you tell somebody: ‘I made two thousand five hundred dollars in my first four weeks’, everyone’s opinion instantly changes... Why do you have to earn so much money from it for there not to be a stigma about it?’”

This implication that her positive sex worker identity is only made valid to other people by monetary gain further reflects the neo-liberal economic ideology in the UK. Here, Ria’s ownership over her identity becomes liminal by virtue of other people’s deep-rooted, misogynistic ideologies about women who engage in sex work.

Ownership of Content

Ownership of content relates to the production and distribution of content, as well as the level of control and agency Ria has over who interacts with her OnlyFans profile. While it is assumed that online sex work enables individuals to work freely for themselves with increased agency and reduced risk of being exploited than sex work in physical spaces, limitations still exist.

The OnlyFans platform itself has very few features that protect their user’s content. This is something that Ria had considered and felt that a feature blocking screen captures, or alerting her to which subscribers have done so, would add security for content creators. Additions such as these would enable her to restrict or block accounts seen to be screen capturing. The lack of such begs the question of how far OnlyFans as a platform values the autonomy and ownership of content creators, and their bodies, that they are profiting from.

In the case of content being stolen and re-distributed without her consent, it is unclear where Ria would stand if she decided to take the matter further. When content is produced and uploaded online, the issue of consent is muddled, and a redistributor may be protected by policy wording that negates consent when content is already considered to be public. Ria accepted that she has a reduced ownership over her content and her resulting online footprint, as implied by her following statement:

Once it’s online, it’s online, it’s never going to go away. It doesn’t matter if you delete the app or delete your account... Anybody in the world could then use your content, pretend to be you, or they could be sending it to people you don’t want to see it.

This draws back to the liminality of sex work in online spaces. Here Ria presented a juxtaposed view of online sex work that implies a difference between her work in a strip club and her work

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on OnlyFans – inside the walls of the strip-club, clients are not allowed to film her performance, therefore her work is left in the club. This is not the case with OnlyFans.

Redistribution Without Consent

As ownership of her content is ambiguous in this context, the potential for sharing outside of the platform has become an accepted part of her online work. Ria adapted to view the sharing of her content positively as free promotion: “I just sort of have the attitude, if somebody is leaking it, then it’s sort of free advertisement...” This could be interpreted as reclaiming her control and ownership by taking what may have been done to ‘expose’ her and seeing it as beneficial. Here, ownership is malleable where she can view redistribution positively and is underpinned by a business mindset whereby her embodied content is the commodity.

Ria explained how her reactions might differ depending on motivations behind redistribution. Predominantly, her concern was other people posing as her to make money from her content without having to face what comes with the role. She made reference to the assumption that online sex work is ‘easy’ and lacks emotional or physical labour. Understandably, she feels negatively toward someone else profiting from her labour and her body without her consent. She expressed this in the next statement.

I would be more bothered about someone pretending it’s theirs because I still had to take time out of my day to produce this content, and it’s my choice to be that explicit and I have consequences for that... It’s not like someone’s ripping *their* body apart.

This is pertinent as it highlights the way in which online sex workers are reduced to the content that they produce and separated from the person producing it. When Ria is making her content, she has complete ownership over her body and what she does with it. However, once this is online, the amount of ownership and control that she has starts to waiver. “That’s me at the end of the day... It’s my body.”

When sex work is conducted exclusively online, creators exist in a liminal space where their ownership and consent is not as clear-cut when it does not involve ‘physical’ violations. This framing emphasises the neo-liberal and patriarchal commodification of the products of sex work, whereby redistribution of sexual images for any purpose without the producer’s consent is not criminalised; it is in fact more likely to be considered as theft of property rather than a violation of rights and ownership over one’s body.

Crucially, the content being produced is created using her body, she is the embodied content. Therefore, ownership of her content is explicitly linked to consent, with the potential for redistribution reducing her ability to consent in all situations. Whilst it is assumed that adult-content creators on OnlyFans have the freedom and agency to produce their own content safely in an online sphere, socio-cultural ideals and influences create overlaps between the virtual and the ‘real’. This makes various layers of ownership of content and consent difficult to navigate.

Discussion and Conclusion

Through the interviews with Ria, the themes of liminality and ownership were clear throughout her experience of using the OnlyFans platform. The overarching liminal state of lockdown in the UK influenced her decision to start creating adult content on OnlyFans; therefore it is

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central to Ria's experience of online sex work so far as she is waiting for the transition back to 'normal'. Within this, there is an additional liminality surrounding her identity as a sex worker – a between-ness of who she is offline and who she is online, with discomfort expressed when situations cause these states to converge and break through the safety of liminality. Ria may experience variances in ownership over her identity as a sex worker when labels based on stigmatisation and patriarchal gender ideologies are applied to her by someone else.

Ownership was a driving factor in the research as it is not uncommon to find leaked or shared images of adult-content creators uploaded onto social media and forums without their consent. In the interviews with Ria, it became clear that there are ways in which she experienced reduced agency and limited consent over the ownership of her content due to how the OnlyFans platform is set up. However, there are elements of using the platform which increase Ria's ownership of her content as well: she is able to create content that she is comfortable with and be as explicit as she chooses to be, with control over her sex worker identity on the platform. Here, liminality infuses into ownership. Ria recognises that once content is posted online, her ownership and control over it decreases – she consented to the content itself, however not necessarily to what might be done with it. Ownership and consent are liminal in this sense due to her embodied content existing in a liminal online space.

Liminality of online sex work filters into other key ideas – the notion of a liminal space has a large scope when exploring online sex work and spaces. This case study has captured a snapshot of the way in which online sex workers using the OnlyFans platform may experience liminal states in various ways. There are links to the ways in which sex workers are perceived in society and how this will impact ownership of their content, identities and bodies. Ria's experience is only one of many. Experiences of ownership and identity will differ for people of different gender, age, ethnicity, ableness, and socio-cultural background using the platform. Other factors will inevitably shape different experiences and further research should extend beyond the feminist lens such as utilising queer theory for further exploration of online sex work.

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