

Final Paper: Only Fans as it Pertains to Creative Industries and Post-Feminism

Matilda Devlin

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INTRODUCTION:

An outbreak in online platforms and industries echoed the outbreak of coronavirus that took place at the beginning of 2021. At the beginning of the pandemic, people worldwide were scrambling to adapt to an unnatural way of living and working. For many people, electronics became their best friends as it was a way to fill their voids of loneliness and boredom. Online life became life—socially, professionally, and privately. Due to this, many platforms that, before the pandemic were unheard of, exploded in popularity, including the website OnlyFans.

OnlyFans is a subscription-based social media platform where creators can make money through fan interaction. Initially, this app's intended use was for creators as a whole, but during coronavirus, it quickly became a platform dominated by sex workers. Like most other industries, the adult-entertainment industry was weakened by the pandemic; thus, workers needed to find another way for income. Creators post explicit content for their paying subscribers, many making decent money with several stories of creators making upwards of 30k a month.

OnlyFans is an example of how the creative industry adjusted to the demanding changes of the pandemic as now it could be both financially sustainable and entirely virtual. For women, in particular, OnlyFans is a post-feministic way to earn an income through the means of creative labor. Creative labor being, “the conceptual and practical convergence of the creative arts (individual talent) with cultural industries (mass scale), in the context of new media technologies (ICTs) within a new knowledge economy, for the use of newly interactive citizen-consumers” (Hartley, 2005). Using post-feministic ideals, virtual sex work could be considered an “individual talent”. This paper will discuss and analyze the relationship between the creative economy and post-feminism as they pertain to the platform OnlyFans. Not only are both concepts relevant to the platform, but they hold relevance in society as the adult entertainment industry, as a creative industry, may be harmful to feminist ideals despite the post-feminist integration of sexuality into the understood concept of feminism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Pornography is a well-established industry and reigns for years over the emerging creative industries. With creative industries gaining recognition and popularity in the general public as a means of work, the question is posed whether or not pornography is considered a creative industry. This question is relevant in recent years as virtual work is becoming more dominant since the coronavirus pandemic. McKee (2016) defines the pornography industry as a creative industry, explaining its similarity to other creative industries such as film, TV, radio, and photography (p.5). Furthermore, he discusses pornography in comparison to generalized aspects of all creative industries, including nomadic labor, meaning: “very few of the creatives working pornography – whether performers, directors, camera people or editors – have full-time jobs with regular hours, a guaranteed salary, health insurance and a pension” (p.9). Nomadic labor, as discussed by Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011), is a defining feature of the creative industries, “jobs offered by cultural and creative industries, and by different but related sectors such as information technology, are marked by high levels of insecurity, casualization and long working hours” (p.6). Thus, this is one corresponding factor allowing the porn industry to be defined as creative labor. Acknowledging the new technological developments, digital advancements in the functioning of the pornography industry is posing a challenge for the traditional business model, which also parallels a creative industry trend, “the development of niche content and a focus on merchandising is common across pornography and other Creative Industries as they respond to the digital environment” (McKee, 2016). This is especially relevant to OnlyFans as content has become entirely niche due to independent creators. With life becoming entirely digital during the coronavirus pandemic, responses to the digital environment were drastic. Even following the pandemic, many prefer to work digitally as digital work via creative labor offers personalized scheduling, identity expression, and more general control over work-life. As a result, there has been an increase in creators who are a part of the adult entertainment industry. Unfortunately, due to the modernity of OnlyFans, there is limited literature available. However, Nikolaos Lykousas analyzed a platform almost identical in nature, FanCentro, where his results can be generalized to OnlyFans. Not only did he find that coronavirus lockdowns accelerated the growth of this specific market, but he stated that the growth included new creators that were not in the industry prior to the pandemic. His team analyzed content, platform usage, and

demographics, with straight females aged 20- 30 years old being the majority of creators (Lykousas et al., 2020). This suggests that women are participating in the post-feminist idea of sexual freedom through entrepreneurship and consumer culture, even more so after the pandemic than before. Lykousas's work may be relevant in understanding possible motives for the increase in creators in the adult entertainment industry. Moreover, his data may signify these platforms' correlation with the concept of post-feminism. The relationship between porn and feminism is disputed within the feminist community, thus offering differing opinions on whether profiting by sexual means is empowering or not. James Griffith's, *Why Become a Pornography Actress* examines motivations for pursuing a career in the adult entertainment industry, specifically female motivations. He interviewed 176 actresses about their reasons for getting involved in the industry and their likes and dislikes about day-to-day work. The top motivator for joining the industry and likes regarding work was money, while the top dislikes included people, risk of STD, and exploitation (Griffith, 2012). The results of his study offer valuable insight into the pornography industry and how the motivations of actresses align with post-feminist ideas or not. His data may aid the argument that porn, as an industry, is not feminist at all, which is an idea *Empowering or Oppressing? Development and Exploration of the Enjoyment of Sexualization Scale*, explores. The paradox of women enjoying sexualization, as promoted in post-feminism, and sexualization being harmful is confusing as the ideas contradict. The goal of the study was to evaluate this paradox and gain insight as to whether or not sexualization works in the benefit of women or if it is actually a form of oppression (Liss et al., 2010). Given the close-relatedness sexualization has to post-femininity, this journal offers further understanding into how post-femininity contributes to society and affects women at large.

ANALYSIS:

As the literature review indicates, the adult entertainment industry can be understood as a creative industry. It is thus important to discuss the implications of this, specifically in the context of pornography. In general, "The creative industries broaden the social base of enterprise culture, extending opportunities to sections of the population previously characterized by low entrepreneurial activity and various forms of social dependency" (Hartley, 2005), including the porn sector. This implies that more people have access to participate, thus explaining why the

number of individuals who make and distribute porn increased, especially during and after the pandemic when the financial struggle was widespread. Additionally, creating an account with OnlyFans is considerably easier than getting involved in the industry through other/ more traditional means. Creative Industry platforms were not only accessible to more populations, but they offered other enticing benefits as well, “In addition to being fairly compensated for the work we do and the skills we bring, we want the ability to learn and grow, shape the content of our work, control our own schedule and express our identities through work” (Hartley, 2005). Regarding pornography, these benefits are especially attractive, as the recently dominant big business model restricted actresses’ independence and control. Among the top dislikes of working in the adult entertainment industry included people, STD risks, exploitation, and work conditions (Griffith, 2012), many of which are removed through platforms such as OnlyFans. Hence, pornography as creative labor may further encourage individuals; specifically, women, to get involved in the industry, selling sexually explicit content online, especially when the accessibility component is taken into consideration. The question must be asked, is growth in the online pornography industry beneficial? Is the emergence of creative labor something that has an overall positive or negative effect on the adult entertainment sector? It certainly provides more independence and flexibility, but it also has the potential to be “futile or degrading” as “recognition, self-realization, and creativity become the basis for exploitation” (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011). As more women sign up for platforms such as OnlyFans, it is important to discuss the consequences in terms of feminism and society. The feminist community holds differing opinions on the relationship between pornography and feminism. Post-feminists would argue that pornography is an expression of feminism as it portrays sexual liberation and exposure at the woman’s choice: “post-feminism in this context seems to mean gently chiding the feminist past, while also retrieving and re-instating some palatable elements, in this case, sexual freedom, the right to drink, smoke, have fun in the city, and be economically independent” (McRobbie, 2007). This understanding of post-feminism is uncomplicatedly pleasant; thus, there is little surprise as to why it is supported. Along with sexual freedom, the sexualization of females in Western society has undoubtedly increased as girls are pressured, socioculturally, to self-sexualize, whether this is through products marketed towards them or normative behaviors via social media. This could be one possible explanation for why on the platform FanCentro, women accounted for 95 percent of all accounts that sell adult content (Lykousas et al., 2020).

Some women may feel empowered by utilizing their bodies for their own financial benefit, as research found that the number one motivator for these women to join the industry was money (Griffith, 2012). Most consumers are male, meaning the industry favors the male gaze, but it is still assumed that “there is no exploitation here... She seems to be doing it out of choice and for her own enjoyment” (McRobbie, 2007). This raises the question, what about producing porn is empowering or enjoyable, the ability to self-sexualize, or the financial reward? The psychological community would claim that overt-sexualization in society is harmful to women and society, especially when it comes to the production and consumption of pornography:

“Although images of women actively courting sexualized attention may seem empowering, they may simply represent another form of social control over women and their sexuality... Similarly, enjoying and courting sexualized male attention may feel positive and empowering to women but maintains the idea that women are valued as sexual objects. Thus, feelings of empowerment may actually serve to help perpetuate the negative consequences of objectification” (Liss et al., 2010).

The assumption here is that women’s empowerment from self-sexualizing is false empowerment. Confounding factors such as money and attention may be responsible for this empowerment instead of the sexualizing behavior itself. In fact, it was found that women who reported enjoying sexualization were more likely to feel shame about their bodies, engage in negative eating habits, and hold appearance-contingent self-esteem. There is little support regarding the positive effects of enjoying sexualization (Liss et al., 2010). Contemplating these negative effects, the post-feminine idea of sexualization being empowering is contradicted as several psychology studies do not support the idea. Similar findings have been released by Facebook, revealing that young girls’ mental health is jeopardized due to the sexual nature and expectations of social media apps such as Instagram. It is possible then that the overt sexualization that post-femininity argues is empowering is actually harmful when analyzing the psychological effects. Relating these findings to the platform OnlyFans, women are further incentivized to engage in online sexual behavior through the reward of money and easy accessibility due to the emerging creative industry market. As the creative industry model offers personal incentives such as convenience and flexibility, platforms such as Onlyfans increase

accessibility, thus encouraging women to involve themselves in the adult entertainment industry. Although it financially benefits women at their own choice, this involvement may be harmful towards mental health, self-perception, and feminism as a movement. The increasing popularity of creative industries along with increasing digitization and increasing sexualization may, in the long run, be detrimental towards women. Feminism has sought for decades to achieve gender equality between men and women. Looking at platforms such as OnlyFans, which employs almost all females with the exception of a few men and non-binary people, shows that the objectification of women is just as prevalent now as it was decades ago. Women have yet to gain recognition and attention in popular culture when it comes to accomplishments and merit—women are still being rewarded for their physical appearance and sexual nature. OnlyFans is an exaggeration of this idea.

CONCLUSION

Post-feminism themes are very prevalent in popular culture today. Hollywood, music, advertisements, and social media all exhibit the sexualization theme of post-feminism. Women have taken control of their bodies and argue that they choose to show off and publicize as a means of “body-positivity”. Scandalous photos have become so normalized in society that girls as young as twelve years old are participating in this cultural phenomenon. With this increased normalization, platforms like OnlyFans have become less exclusive to just traditional sex workers and now include an array of social media influencers, celebrities, and average women. Getting involved in the industry has never been so simple. Combining that simplicity with the growing normalization of public sexualization and the advantages working within a creative industry offers, is very enticing, especially for women who need money. As discussed in this paper, there are possible negative psychological consequences of OnlyFans when analyzing it under the lens of feminism and creative industries. Commercial culture predisposes women to these negative psychological consequences as marketing strategies reinforce the importance of physical appearance. The media also plays a huge role in this as celebrities, who oftentimes pay for their appearance, present themselves in a sexualized fashion online. Their followers then internalize and mimic this behavior. Post-feminism encourages sexualization as a way to promote sexual liberty. Although all women should have and feel the freedom to act as they

please, the promotion of sexuality as empowering and feminine in the media is damaging. Women are more than their bodies, and although there is nothing wrong with selling sex or adult content, it should not be a phenomenon that is normalized in society specifically because of the damaging effects. In the coming years, more research should be done on the effect the promotion of sexualization has on the mental health of females.

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