

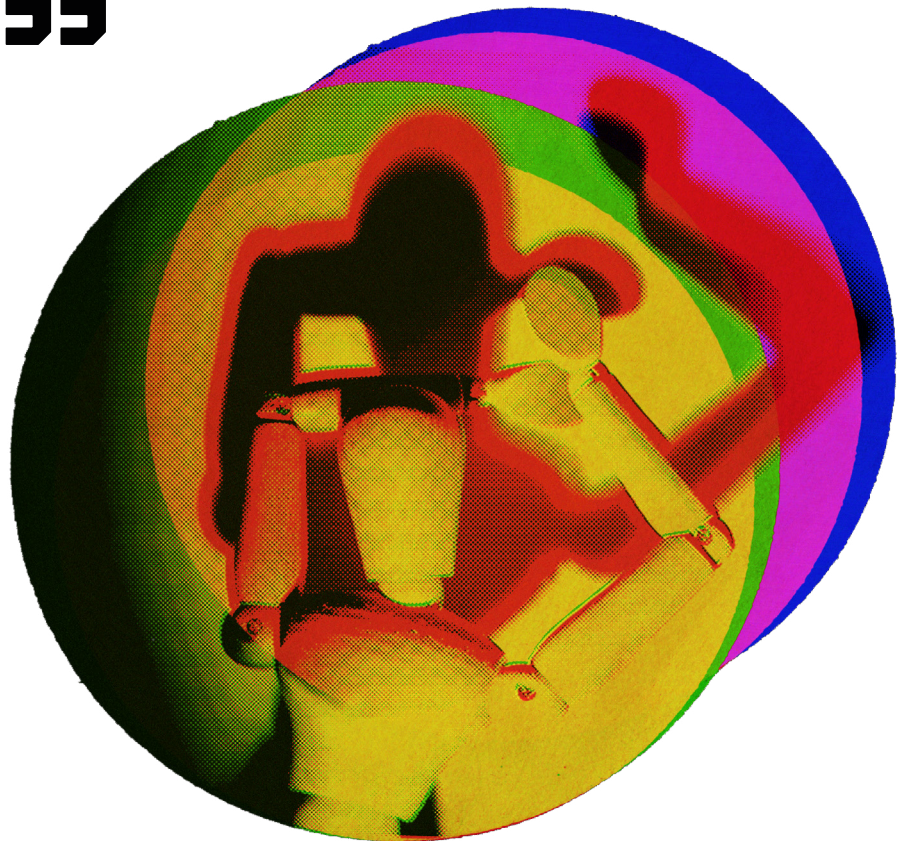


WHEN BUYING SEXUAL SERVICES BECOMES NORMAL: CORPORATE PROFIT AND HUMAN LOSS

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This essay is the first in a three-part series for Fully Human. Their themes are the normalisation of commodified sex; sexual objectification; and the limits of consent.

What happens when sex for money becomes a societal norm? This has become a pressing question, as the internet has radically changed sex work⁰¹ and, within living memory, paying for sexual services has never been more commonplace. Alongside the general proliferation of porn and sex-cam sites, arguably one company has been at the forefront of this normalisation: OnlyFans. This British corporation, which shot to prominence in only a few years, runs an online platform enabling individuals to share content (photos, videos, live performances) and chat with their subscribers for a monthly fee (as well as fees-per-view), taking a 20% cut in the process. The majority of this content is sexual (OnlyFans claims not to keep a tally, but [estimates range from 60% to as high as 98%](#)) and is [performed by young women](#), whilst the majority of [its roughly 240 million \(and counting\)](#) subscribers are [men, with a large percentage of them also being young](#). In order to attract subscribers (aka buyers), those selling sexual performances predominantly advertise via social media platforms such as Instagram, X, Snapchat, Reddit and TikTok, contributing to the bombard of sexually objectifying content that tweens and teens are subjected to online⁰².

OnlyFans' business model is highly lucrative – it reported profits of [\\$525 million](#) in 2022 and is growing astronomically, gaining an estimated [500,000 subscribers every day](#). Arguably a large part of its success is down to it marketing itself as simply a platform for 'creators' and their 'fans' – it boasts of being a social media site that "facilitates authentic connections", avoiding any mention of its general use⁰³ in contrast to other webcamming sites such as Chaturbate where this is front and centre. Furthermore, OnlyFans has benefited from the actions of the free online porn sites that went before it (and exist alongside it), given how much they have done to normalise and promote consumerist sex.

The rise of OnlyFans has been celebrated both as [another tech success story and as a boon for entrepreneurship](#) – an apparently ethical and safe way for 'adult content creators' to get paid, and therefore a highly valued contribution to a neoliberal market economy and culture. Alongside this, some child protection advocates have been reassured by the platform's robust age verification measures in at least some countries. But very little attention has been paid to the bigger picture here – both to the wider online sexualised ecosystem in which OnlyFans, porn sites and social media platforms symbiotically feed one another, and also to the implications of all this for us as humans – what does mean, for example, for our potentials to relate to one another, to lead ethical lives, to live well and to flourish? What about the developing sexuality of adolescents and young adults as they are subjected to ever more advanced capitalist forces and business models that train boys to approach sex as a consumer and girls as a supplier? And when sexuality that is based on authentic connection is demoted, what does this mean for intimate relationships or even their possibility? Furthermore, what is the cost to women of being paid to engage in sexual activity for strangers that they don't desire?

01: There is much debate about the terms 'prostitution' and 'sex work'. In this essay, for ease, I use the term 'prostitution' to describe the situation in which a person buys contact sexual activity with another person (for example, sexual intercourse or oral sex) and I use 'sex work' as a wider term including all sexual activities that someone is being paid to perform, not only prostitution but also stripping, sexual performances over webcam, sex calls and sexting, and performing in pornography. By using the term 'sex work' I am not implying that sex equates to just another form of work or is non-exploitative – indeed this article is arguing that there are profound issues with viewing it as such.

02: 5Rights (2021) *Pathways: How digital design puts children at risk*. <https://5rightsfoundation.com/uploads/Pathways-how-digital-design-puts-children-at-risk.pdf>

03: Van der Nagel, E. (2021). Competing platform imaginaries of NSFW content creation on OnlyFans. *Porn Studies*, 8(4), 394-410.

CHANGING THE SEXUAL CLIMATE

In contrast to our often rightly impassioned and robust responses to people or things who directly hurt others, humans are far less adept at spotting and dealing with those that hurt others via less direct routes. So, for example, individual and societal responses to a man raping his partner are a far cry from our response to all the rape jokes and sexist “banter” in his peer group that fed into this abuse. This fallacy in which emotions guide us to judge the A who hurts B far more harshly than the A who hurts C via B means that we have been poor at addressing a whole range of harmful practices in today’s complex, hyperconnected world – whether these be carbon emissions, tax loopholes for the rich, online disinformation, or the sale of arms to countries who kill thousands of civilians. Yet these things that harm insidiously and pervasively (termed distal factors) are often far more dangerous than more proximal ones.

Whilst it is widely acknowledged that OnlyFans and other companies in the online sex industry can proximally harm (for example, [when they are used by coercive pimps and traffickers⁰⁴](#)), how might they be acting as distal pollutants? What is lost (or indeed never found) in a world in which buying and selling sex has become ‘everyday’, a new normal?

At the heart of commodified sex is the assumption that mutuality in sex is obsolete: the reciprocal, spiralling desire in which one person’s feelings are central to the others, in which the other’s selfhood is central to the experience (my wanting to have this sexual experience with you is inextricably bound up with you wanting to have it with me). Instead what is normalised and legitimised is a version of sex in which one person’s body and performance is used for another’s gratification – the money is paid so that the performing person’s authentic, core feelings can be hidden and disregarded⁰⁵. As prostitution survivor Rachel Moran describes this heart of sex work, “we were toy humans. And we toy humans played out limitless scenes that were the direct opposite of equality”⁰⁶. There is of course a clear gender dynamic here, so we might sum up the underlying sexual script⁰⁷ as ‘sex involves objectified women performing for male pleasure’.

“In my clients’ eyes, I am not really here as a person. I am a means to an end, a vehicle for their desires, a facilitator for their lusts and an object on which they can project their fantasies”

Melissa Harding, webcam sex worker⁰⁸

04: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/sex-lies-video-cams-andrew-tate-turned-women-into-slaves-prosecutors-say-2023-02-02/>

<https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/onlyfans-sex-legal-cases/>

05: Whisnant, R. (2017). [Not] Buying It: Prostitution as Unwanted Sex. *Dignity: A Journal of Analysis of Exploitation and Violence*, 2(2), 9.

Tyler, M. (2016). Theorizing harm through the sex of prostitution. In *Prostitution, harm and gender inequality* (pp. 87-102). Routledge.

06: Moran, R. (2013) *Paid for: My journey through prostitution*. WW Norton: London (p. 284)

07: Sexual scripts are mental stories, blueprints or guidelines of how sexual encounters happen and what they involve, or what is sexy; for more discussion of sexual scripts and how they operate see Hanson (2021). *Pornography and human futures*. Fully Human.

08: Quoted in *Culture Reframed* (2023). OnlyFans is only porn: The only ecosystem of webcamming and OnlyFans. https://culturereframed.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/culture-reframed_whitepaper_022023_draft2.pdf

When this version of sex is taken on board, whether explicitly endorsed or implicitly internalised, it can breed an entitled and dehumanising attitude in males and a performative, objectified self in females⁰⁹. This in turn can infect intimate relationships between men and women, boys and girls, research finding for example that porn use reduces relational and sexual satisfaction¹⁰ and increases break-ups¹¹. So the notion that 'what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas', or rather what happens online stays online, looks instead to be a myth perpetuated by those who serve to benefit from it.

And we might expect OnlyFans and its equivalents to be in some ways more destructive than free porn – how does it feel for a woman to have her partner sexting another woman and paying for her “just for you” masturbation videos? She might well experience this as a double gut-punch, feeling the betrayal of infidelity alongside that of his disregard for authentic female sexuality. In other situations, girls and women may not walk away from their male partner's sexuality, shaped as it has been towards consumerism and objectification, but may seek to align themselves to it. As Melinda Tankard Reist observes, “for many girls, naming and expressing emotional or physical pain is the new taboo because it transgresses the male porn script of a continually up-for-it girl who takes it all with a smile”. The invalidation and suppression of girls' and women's feelings at play here is a constriction of core parts of themselves – an ironic and tragic end-point of business practices forged in the crucible of so-called 'sexual liberation'.

CONDUCTIVE TO ABUSE

When we are encouraged by the overtures of the online sex industry to see sexual mutuality as an optional extra, there is also much greater scope for unwanted sexual experiences and abuse. Instead of interdependent, reciprocal sexual desire, consent (in the best case scenario) is all that matters. Consent which may be given due to power dynamics, manipulated feelings, the hiding of true intentions, the influence of alcohol – or because 'otherwise he'll go elsewhere', 'everyone else is having anal sex', 'I should have lost my virginity by now', 'sex is how I'm valued', 'I shouldn't get emotional about sex', and a host of other reasons which have everything to do with our culture's sexual norms, and little to do with good sex¹².

All this brings us to the unwanted sexual experiences of webcam performers – what does it mean for them to suppress their authentic feelings in encounters in which they are exposing the most intimate parts of themselves to strangers that they may find threatening or repellent, providing sexual requests ranging from the bizarre to the sadistic, and feigning desire in countless sexting exchanges? We are

09: Karsay, K., Knoll, J., & Matthes, J. (2018). Sexualizing media use and self-objectification: A meta-analysis. *Psychology of women quarterly*, 42(1), 9-28.

Tylka, T. L., & Kroon Van Diest, A. M. (2015). You looking at her “hot” body may not be “cool” for me: Integrating male partners' pornography use into objectification theory for women. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 39(1), 67-84.

Wright, P. J., & Tokunaga, R. S. (2016). Men's objectifying media consumption, objectification of women, and attitudes supportive of violence against women. *Archives of sexual behavior*, 45, 955-964.

10: Wright, P. J., Tokunaga, R. S., Kraus, A., & Klann, E. (2017). Pornography consumption and satisfaction: A meta-analysis. *Human Communication Research*, 43(3), 315-343.

11: Perry, S. L., & Schleifer, C. (2018). Till porn do us part? A longitudinal examination of pornography use and divorce. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 55(3), 284-296.

12: Faustino, M. J., & Gavey, N. (2024). The failed promise of consent in women's experiences of coercive and unwanted anal sex with men. *Feminism & Psychology*, 09593535241234429.

told that, barring overt trafficking and the involvement of under 18s, there is nothing to worry about here, simply women curating sexual personas in the name of empowerment and liberation – and that any concerns come from stigma and an old-fashioned prudishness.

THE SEA OF NEOLIBERALISM

Whilst the economics of neoliberalism may have fallen out of favour, our culture remains inflected with its ideology. This is a worldview that sees society as a universal market, every part of who we are (even the most vulnerable or intimate) as fair game for profit-making, and people as simply rational agents, making choices and engaging in transactions that maximise their interest (versus, for example, being bearers of inalienable rights and responsibilities, or relational creatures who depend on care and respect from one another)¹³. Like all pervasive cultural norms, it is a sea in which we swim whose water we are generally oblivious to. Neoliberal assumptions lead governments to hold back on regulation, privileging the freedom of people to seek profit (versus freedoms to say live without abuse, thrive through rich relationships, or contribute to a fairer world). So it makes sense that in this milieu, those who hold back endorsement of someone's personal choices find themselves risking shame and censure. And that those who find new ways of making money, or refashion old ways, are lionised – a blind eye often turned to questions of ethics, harm, rights and dignity.

In this context, when, for example, a 19 year old girl on OnlyFans meets strangers' requests for sexual chat about herself as a slut alongside live streams of herself masturbating and inserting sex toys, we only pay attention to her "choice" to do this and we call this empowerment. We are fuzzy on what exactly she is empowered to do here, beyond the performances themselves, which most people would be averse to and not hope for the power to do. We do not pay attention to her feelings of embarrassment, shame, humiliation, violation, disgust and repulsion, that she herself must also not attend to in order to get through the day and therefore has learned to psychologically dissociate from, often with the help of alcohol¹⁴. Her body and subconscious however retain knowledge of all of this, contributing to the risk of her developing posttraumatic stress disorder at a later point, once she is out of "survival mode"¹⁵.

13: <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2017/aug/18/neoliberalism-the-idea-that-changed-the-world>

Pendenza, M., & Lamattina, V. (2019). Rethinking self-responsibility: an alternative vision to the neoliberal concept of freedom. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 63(1), 100-115.

Becker, J. C., Hartwich, L., & Haslam, S. A. (2021). Neoliberalism can reduce well being by promoting a sense of social disconnection, competition, and loneliness. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 60(3), 947-965.

14: Culture Reframed (2023). OnlyFans is only porn: The only ecosystem of webcamming and OnlyFans. <https://culturereframed.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/culture-reframed-whitepaper-022023-draft2.pdf>

Stella (2011) Dancing pornography. In M. Tankard Reist & A. Bray (eds), *Big Porn Inc: Exposing the harms of the global pornography industry*. Spinifex Press.

Moran, R. (2013) *Paid for: My journey through prostitution*. WW Norton

15: There is more research on the risks and harms of prostitution (street and indoor forms) than there is on other types of sex work. Whilst some risks reduce when sex work is online (for example, physical violence) and a greater degree of detachment from the buyers might generally be maintained (lowering some psychological harms), much of what is thought to be core to the harms of sex work remain (being paid to sexually perform for another, lower one's sexual boundaries, and ignore one's core feelings about it all), and survivors of sex work readily make the links. See for example, Moran, R. (2013) *Paid for: My journey through prostitution*. WW Norton; Doring, M (2022) *Any girl: a memoir of surviving prostitution in Ireland*. Hatchette. Stella (2011) Dancing pornography. In M. Tankard Reist & A. Bray (eds), *Big Porn Inc: Exposing the harms of the global pornography industry*. Spinifex Press. In addition, webcam sex work appears to be for some a gateway to prostitution, both for those buying and those selling (Avery Centre, 2021, *OnlyFans: A case study of exploitation in the digital age*)

"It's only in recent years that I'm feeling the impact of what men did to me – the impact of what I thought at the time was consequence free. And the more I realise that I matter, the more I experience feelings of worth, the more I see the past clearly and this clarification is painful"

Mia Doring¹⁶

We also do not pay attention to the childhood emotional neglect that left her with low self-worth and taught her to tune out of her feelings, or the sexual abuse that she is subconsciously trying to resolve through traumatic re-enactment (a psychological process in which people feel compelled to return to situations reminiscent of their trauma, thought to be an attempt to resolve residual feelings of powerlessness)¹⁷.

"I've had friends who had OnlyFans accounts... the reason they were doing these things was not a positive, empowering thing... they were not very well and they needed some kind of validation... so even when it can look like this person is doing this because they want to do it and they're empowering... actually a lot of the time that's not why they're doing it... they're not OK.. both of those girls were suffering really badly with their mental health and that's why they were doing this stuff"

Young woman, herself a survivor of abuse, in an interview with the author

We do not pay attention to the persuasive influences of a friend who sought to get her onto OnlyFans so they could benefit from the 'recommend a friend' scheme; the various 'e-pimping' agencies who approached her on Instagram, knowing they could profit her doing sex work¹⁸; the blog on the OnlyFans site encouraging her to cater to her 'superfans' so they feel 'they're getting something special'¹⁹ – or indeed the influence of our wider culture telling her that sex work was a no-brainer – lucrative and psychologically not a big deal.

"I spent a considerable amount of time in contact with girls on TikTok and Instagram encouraging them to do OnlyFans, and to try to get them to join our agency. For girls who didn't meet our minimum earnings, we would give them tips on how to grow... We let them think they were privileged to come on board with us... We let them think we cared for them... Some were lonely, shy, and socially isolated. Many came from broken homes... Any boundaries they may have had when starting out were soon broken down. There was too much competition for them to say "no". 'Age play' was huge! The girls who looked the youngest were the most in demand and made the most money so you'd promote them that way... As time went on I struggled to even be able to open a photo or video without feeling sick. I would cry everyday for these girls and think about the young babies in my family and if they grew up to do this how heartbroken I would be"

'Victoria', former employee at an agency which manages sex workers on OnlyFans²⁰ ('e-pimping')²¹

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- 16: Psychotherapist and sex trade survivor. Doring, M. (2022) *Any girl: A memoir of surviving prostitution in Ireland*. Hatchette (pg. 201)
- 17: Hanson, E. (2016). Understanding and preventing re-victimisation. Clinical practice at the edge of care: Developments in working with at-risk children and their families, 197-227.
Hanson, E. (2013) Exploring the relationship between neglect and child sexual exploitation: Evidence Scope 1. Research in Practice: Dartington. <https://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/publications/2016/november/child-neglect-and-its-relationship-to-other-forms-of-harm-responding-effectively-to-children-s-needs-evidence-scopes/>
- Levy, M. S. (1998). A helpful way to conceptualize and understand reenactments. *The Journal of psychotherapy practice and research*, 7(3), 227-235.
- 18: https://www.collectiveshout.org/why_i_left_onlyfans
- 19: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/16/magazine/e-pimps-onlyfans.html>; OnlyFans is also reported to send emails and notifications pressurising people to "create content" (Avery Center, 2021, *OnlyFans: A case study of exploitation in the digital age*).
- 20: https://www.collectiveshout.org/why_i_left_onlyfans
- 21: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/16/magazine/e-pimps-onlyfans.html>

"I didn't 'choose' prostitution: a mixture of the culture I lived in during the 1990s, 'sex-positive' feminism, and a longing to be loved by my biological papa who had abandoned my siblings, mother and me, chose it for me. Poverty chose it for me. Anger chose it for me. Wanting to be loved chose it for me"

Geneviève Gilbert²²

We also ignore the pivotal role of poverty and economic instability, and the way in which sex work can so often begin as one thing but over time ensnare people into spirals of humiliating acts, low self-worth and dissociation²³. And perhaps most importantly of all, we ignore the way in which the "choice" narrative works to silence and blame girls and women who are feeling any of this. Many who sell sex are traumatised by this experience but feel unable to share this, as they will be dismissed as having chosen the thing they're complaining about. This amounts to society blaming them for their trauma, and this, interacting with the self-blame that is so common following sexual abuse, works to compound the damage and undermine possibilities of healing.

"Society's misplaced certainties around the essence of prostitution seriously impede the former prostitute from moving on and moving beyond it. Cash is not only a legitimiser and a silencer: it is an obscurer, and a ruthlessly effective one. With her victimisation itself blurred and shrouded in obscurity, how much more difficult is it for a woman to arrive at healing, when her first hurdle is in reaching the understanding that she even deserves it?"

Rachel Moran²⁴

Giving weight to any of these factors can be narrated as 'disrespecting women's choices' and seeing them as 'victims' (the ultimate neoliberal sin, transgressing as it does the vision of humans as invulnerable 'free' agents). Yet this understanding of constrained pathways, processes of revictimization, psychological entrapment, and the trauma of dehumanisation is now routinely brought to bear in discussions of adolescent sexual exploitation, providing the foundation for the care, protection, and respect for their deepest autonomy that the young people caught up in this are due²⁵. But when someone steps over the line of their 18th birthday, it is as if they miraculously change nature, and they no longer merit a rich understanding of what it is to be human and all the valuing and curiosity that this involves.

To be clear, the point here is not that all the above factors are relevant for all performers on OnlyFans – indeed I am not arguing against the existence of performers who, by dint of certain circumstances, are unconstrained and unharmed by their experiences. Rather, I am pointing out that some (or similar others) are commonly at play, meaning that many young women are doing sex work even though this is damaging and conflicts with their core emotions and desired sense of worth. Key to this tragic situation (arguably a huge, ignored sphere of human suffering) are the actions of a whole host of people who serve to profit from it, aided and abetted by the deceptions of a neoliberal sexual culture. All this matters much more than if we were talking about another form of 'work', because sex is a

22: Founder and Executive Director of the [Pink Cross Foundation Australia](https://nordicmodelnow.org/testimonial/genevieve-gilbert/) Inc; quote from testimony published here <https://nordicmodelnow.org/testimonial/genevieve-gilbert/>

23: See for example, Stella (2011) Dancing pornography. In M. Tankard Reist & A. Bray (eds), *Big Porn Inc: Exposing the harms of the global pornography industry*. Spinifex Press.

24: Quoted from *Paid For: My Journey through prostitution* (pg. 269)

25: Pearce, J. (Ed.) (2019). *Child sexual exploitation: Why theory matters*. Policy Press.

unique site of human vulnerability, and the loss of one's 'sexual serenity'²⁶ a fundamental harm. This is readily apparent to most of us if we truly imagine a sexual encounter with a leering stranger who we find sexually repulsive and disinterested in our feelings. It is also apparent in how we feel about the scenario, on the cards at one point in Germany, where people would be compelled by job centres into sex work if they couldn't find other employment.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Neoliberal ideals have dovetailed with the dictates of the sexual revolution to give us a world in which corporations have colonised our sexuality – sex becoming just another site of financial transaction. In this dystopian nexus, commodified sex is proving itself a strong competitor to the sex of mutuality, authenticity and worth, and fundamentals of what it is to be human are being ever further denied and obscured. In this process, we all lose, even if this loss is of that which has never been known and so cannot be grieved. Losses of intimate connection, trust and security, 'infinite play'²⁷, sexual serenity, depths of care.

As technology advances, enabling ever more sophisticated corporate intrusions into intimate parts of the soul and psyche, the collective tasks of establishing and fighting for what it is to be fully human have never been more crucial. We must foreground inherent human worth; our understanding of human vulnerability, emotion and core autonomy; and our potential for rich, connective life in the face of those cultural forces that at best render all this irrelevant and at worst hold it in contempt.

26: Moran, R. (2013) *Paid for: My journey through prostitution*. WW Norton

27: For a discussion of this rich way of living in relation to sex and relationships, see Hanson (2021) *Pornography and Human Futures*: <https://fullyhuman.org.uk/pornography-and-human-futures/>