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A Look at Sex Work and OnlyFans Through Self-Definition and Hegelian Dialectic

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A Look at Sex Work and OnlyFans Through Self-Definition and Hegelian Dialectic

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by
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Dedication

I dedicate this senior project to my family, as I would have absolutely nothing without them. Without their encouragement, this writing piece would have never come to fruition.

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Introduction

In 2020 the entire globe was struck by the Covid-19 pandemic. Due to stay-at-home restrictions, many people were forced to isolate themselves. Due to different industries closing during the time, people also lost their jobs. During this time, I was a junior at home for the semester. While at home and doing school work, I spent much time on the internet because social media and other platforms were the only way to connect with people. In 2020, while thinking of a possible senior project idea, I knew I wanted to create a project involving the internet. While I was at home, being on the internet was a source of escape and entertainment. While on Twitter and other social media platforms, I heard of the website OnlyFans.com. OnlyFans.com is a subscription-based website created in 2016. Multiple things are hosted on the website, yet, OnlyFans.com is known for adult entertainment content. I was researching the new platform and its skyrocketing popularity during the pandemic. At the same time doing that research, I also watched and read many think pieces about OnlyFans.com and how it was beneficial for sex workers. OnlyFans.com allowed people to join the industry as they could upload on their terms and claim most of the revenue. I also read about how people who were not a part of the industry joined OnlyFans.com as a new source of income during this time of hardship and to find confidence.

I took many classes surrounding marginalized communities throughout my career at Bard College. At the same time, coming up with a senior project, I wanted to incorporate what I learned into my senior project and push myself out of my comfort zone. Especially while studying political theory, I wanted to take what I learned from my political theory classes and

apply them to the marginalized groups that I had not explored before. Being at home reading about OnlyFans.com and reading accounts from sex workers, I realized the importance of studying the autonomy of sex workers. I wondered how OnlyFans.com could be an accessible mainstream platform for adult entertainment that can aid in the liberation of sex workers.

Accordingly, this senior project aims to examine women's sex work and its place in? feminist ideology. When I draw upon the feminist theory in the following pages, I specifically focus on how these theories affect women in the industry. My goal is not to explore how other marginalized identities interact with sex work. While my focus on women within sex workers only could be seen as a shortcoming of the project's reach, I believe this limited approach enables a careful analysis of the experiences of women sex workers and the feminist discourse surrounding sex work.

The following project includes three chapters. In chapter one, I will give a brief history of internet pornography. The emergence of the internet has helped the global spread of pornography as people could share images from their private collections and post them to bulletin websites, thus increasing access to internet pornography. Within the early days of the internet, anyone could post anything. Internet porn first came from old magazines that were reposted to archive websites. Then it transformed into the internet pornography that is seen today. In order to understand the current climate of sex work and how OnlyFans.com revolutionalized the adult entertainment industry, it is essential to examine the history of internet sex work.

After analyzing internet pornography history, I move to examine the state of the current mainstream pornography industry. Mainstream pornography websites have adapted and changed

to appease the consumer. However, constant oversights have made it hard for performers to gain total compensation for their scenes. At the same time, mainstream adult entertainment agencies have made it difficult for their talent to receive more compensation as they charge flat rates per scene. Sex workers who have worked within the adult entertainment industry advocate for safer work environments and equal pay. OnlyFans.com is a rising competitor to popular pornography websites. Through this research, I painted a picture of the climate of pornography and offered a brief account of what the online adult entertainment industry looks like as a whole. I draw upon the resources of sex workers and agencies created to protect new sex workers within the industry. Finally, the chapter takes a deep dive into the creation of OnlyFans.com and how it has disrupted the online pornography industry. OnlyFans.com rose in popularity when people were instructed to stay home due to the pandemic, while the public sentiment towards popular mainstream pornography websites changed. Some of OnlyFans.com's features gave sex workers more autonomy over the content they created. Chapter one depicts the history of online sex work and prepares the reader for chapter two's analysis of the feminist discourse about sex work and OnlyFans.com.

Chapter Two discusses the debate around sex work within the feminist community. The chapter is separated into two sections. The first section addresses the feminist argument against sex work. Some feminists believe that sex work is more harmful to women and see it as unable to advance liberation as it still depends on patriarchy and feeds into its theme of women's sexuality. This section focuses on two arguments from anti-sex work feminists specifically. The first is the safety concern, and the second is the concern of feeding into the patriarchy's pleasure.

The second section of the chapter discusses the arguments of pro-sex work feminists. Sex work is commonly dismissed as illegitimate and bad work, but what is good work? Raising this broader question, I here discuss why individuals may willingly join the sex work industry and examine the intellectual work and resources that feminists who are sex workers built upon to protect and advocate for sex workers. Finally, I discuss how OnlyFans.com fits within the narrative of the feminist discourse of sex work.

The third and final chapter examines how political theories of domination and liberation can be applied to sex workers. During the pandemic, OnlyFans.com brought a conversation about women's sexuality to the forefront of public discourse. Now more than ever, pornstars have been a part of the social media consciousness. Many adult entertainers have become social media influencers and pop culture references. Now that OnlyFans.com and pornography are more accessible, it has forced more people to discuss the adult entertainment industry. In chapter three, I examine the socio-political repercussions of being a sex worker from the perspective of liberation.

The chapter is divided into two sections. The first section is autonomy. I examine two theorists, Emmanuel Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. I discuss Emmanuel Kant's theory of self-consciousness. I use Kant's theory to base my more significant argument that sex workers' autonomy is conditional on their oppressors; I then examine Hegel's Lordship and Bondsmen essay. I use both theorists to argue that sex workers' autonomy is compromised due to the constant oppression they face from society. To examine this point, I use the Hegelian lordship bondsman dialectic. I argue that sex workers have three different bondsmen, the patriarchy,

society, and anti-sex work feminists. These three groups collectively work to control sex workers' autonomy.

In the second section of the chapter, I draw upon the black feminist theory of self-definition as a way to break away from the patriarchy's policing of women's sexuality. Self-definition is the idea that individuals can find their identity independent from the patriarchy and within the context of their community. I examine self-definition as a tool for women to employ their identity outside of the impositions of oppression. As self-definition works directly against the patriarchy, I will also discuss how self-definition can work to define sex workers' space within the feminist movement. The chapter concludes by examining how sex workers have used self-definition in emancipatory ways in the past and argue for OnlyFans.com's ability to offer women resources for alternative and emancipatory forms of self-definition.

Chapter One: Orgasms Online

Within my paper, I will be working to establish what it means to self-dine oneself outside of the context given by the oppressor. While examining this idea, I will be using the frame of sex work due to the marginalization of the occupation. This chapter offers a historical analysis of internet sex work, focusing on the emergence of webcamming and popular websites that distribute pornography. It starts with the analysis of the internet bulletin websites where internet pornography was first circulated among the masses. Then moves to examine the mainstream adult entertainment industry and some exploitative experiences involving adult actresses who decided to work for popular adult entertainment companies. Their experiences are addressed in this context and regarding the mainstream adult entertainment industry issues. Building on this analysis, the final part of the chapter introduces the case study of OnlyFans.com. Emerging in the United Kingdom in 2016, this website became a space where sex workers could safely practice online work while accessing more of their funds. OnlyFans.com gives online sex workers more autonomy over their content and the community they foster. OnlyFans.com helps sex workers take control over the scenes they produce. OnlyFans.com can be a helpful tool for women's liberation, as creators can produce their content outside the guides of the patriarchy.

A Deep Dive into the History of Online Adult Entertainment and Webcam Models

Digital porn has been on the internet since its conception. Before examining the case study of OnlyFans, it is essential to offer a brief overview of the historical relationship between the internet and pornography. Within the early start of the internet, people could only access pictures that were shared interpersonally due to the low modems. Yet, with the creation of bulletin board websites, people were able to upload the images that they had on their personal computers for more people to see.¹ In order to build a more extensive library of pornography, these sites would incentivize their users to upload more images by letting users access more adult photos for the number of images they upload to the bulletin, which resulted in fast-growing libraries.² However, most bulletin websites did not directly advertise the adult images on their platform. Bulletin websites would use word of mouth to quickly circulate what was offered on their platforms. As the number of users grew, the system in which bulletin websites would let their users access images changed to a monetized system, which proved successful as people would pay for these images. The bulletin-style websites are the blueprint for modern free adult entertainment websites that rely on uploads from their users. Due to the new nature of the internet at the time, there was a lack of knowledge on how to deal with legal conflicts online. This lack of legal precedent resulted in a rise in copyrighted images being shared and stolen from the company and

¹ Penelope Liveright, Chapter 6 – A History of Internet Porn, Internet History , n.d., accessed April 28, 2022, <https://www.internethistorypodcast.com/2015/01/history-of-internet-porn/>.

² "Chapter 6 – A History of Internet Porn."

creators. Although this was a problem during the early years of the internet, content theft is still a problem within the adult entertainment industry.

In 1993 Playboy, a publication known for some of its more erotic photography, sued a popular bulletin website, Event Horizon, for copyright infringement.³ They were uploading Playboy's images and old issues. Playboy's case against Event Horizon was one of the earliest litigation cases against a digital proprietor.⁴ Playboy, a multi-million dollar company, had the resources to sue Event Horizons and force them to put regulations for their users as to what they were allowed to upload. However, as internet pornography grew, the problem of regulations and copyright infringement only became worst. For example, Pornhub.com in 2020 removed all of its unverified content. Before the change of policy, anyone could upload content onto the website. This change of policy came because of allegations of child abuse videos being found on the website.⁵ Along with child pornography being removed, many pirated videos were removed from the platform. Pornhub.com hosted over thirteen million videos before the change of policy, and after the change, there were about seven million videos left.⁶ This shows a wide range of unverified content hosted on the site. Although the policy targeted child pornography and ripped videos, it also opened another conversation as many unverified adult entertainers were forced off the website. Although this lawsuit against Event Horizon may have set that specific website back, internet pornography continued to evolve with the internet and the discussion surrounding how to monetize internet content.

³ "Chapter 6 – A History of Internet Porn."

⁴ "Chapter 6 – A History of Internet Porn."

⁵ Joe Price, "Pornhub Has Removed All Unverified Content From the Site," Complex, last modified December 14, 2020, accessed April 28, 2022, <https://www.complex.com/life/2020/12/adult-video-site-removed-all-unverified-content>.

⁶ Price, "Pornhub Has Removed All Unverified Content."

Cyber pornography was able to adapt to the rapid changes as the modems were able to upload more images at a rapid rate in time, and people started to upload not just images but videos.⁷ Adult entertainment companies were at the forefront of video streaming as these companies were able to bypass the plug-in and directly stream from their websites. Adult entertainment websites were also at the forefront of video cam videos and modern-day streaming. Adult entertainers who do cam work are individuals who can perform in front of a camera that streams to their audience. In order to have access to these cam streams, the audience would have to pay the performers either by a minute or by the message they sent. Cam adult entertainers revolutionized the adult entertainment industry as the audience was now able to interact with the performers, thus making the experience exclusive to the audience.

One of the earliest streamers was Jennifer Kaye Ridgely, also known on the internet as JenniCams. She was a college student from Dickinson College in Pennsylvania and is known as one of the first internet personalities to start streaming her life.⁸ She would stream many things, from moving, her daily life, and even her sexual activities.⁹ She quickly understood how profitable her streaming was as she then shifted to a system that offered premium videos and streams for a price. Through this way of distribution, she was able to control her content and directly benefit from its distribution. Unfortunately, Jennifer Ridgely had to shut down her account due to a change in PayPal's policy restricting nudity.¹⁰ Independent adult entertainers were struggling because companies were rapidly changing their policies to confront the ongoing

⁷ "Chapter 6 – A History of Internet Porn."

⁸ Hugh Hart, "April 14, 1996: JenniCam Starts Lifecasting," *Wired*, last modified April 18, 2010, accessed April 28, 2022, <https://www.wired.com/2010/04/0414jennicam-launches/>.

⁹ Hart, "JenniCam Starts Lifecasting."

¹⁰ Hart, "JenniCam Starts Lifecasting."

flux of adult entertainment online. Due to the success of internet streaming, popular adult entertainment companies created sections on their websites that were specifically tailored for webcamming. Although Jennifer Ridgely's career was short, she gained a massive amount of followers showing the promising future of streaming and the success of internet pornography. The appeal of web-camming content is the ability to interact with a performer. Consumers like having the ability to dictate the streams they are watching within specific parameters. In addition, if a customer were to come back to the stream and continuously spend money, they would then grow a rapport with the adult entertainer they are funding. Consumers were looking for more than just watching their favorite adult entertainer; with interactive adult webcam streaming, they were able to imagine a relationship. This interactive model proved to be profitable as OnlyFans.com grew its base on the ability to interact with the entertainer.

The Current Climate of Mainstream Adult Entertainment Companies

Due to the rise of digital sex work and webcam entertainers, websites arose specifically for webcam models to find an audience and make money. These websites have different systems in which the consumers could pay the entertainers. For example, a popular currency on a webcam website is a coin system.¹¹ People would pay the website money to have a number of coins to pay the performer. These coins would then be used to pay the performer to do certain

¹¹ Angela Jones, “‘I Get Paid to Have Orgasms’: Adult Webcam Models’ Negotiation of Pleasure and Danger,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 42, no. 1 (September 1, 2016): 227–256, accessed April 28, 2022, <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/686758>.

acts or to start a private room.¹² Although these webcam streaming websites were lucrative for popular performers, the websites took a substantial amount of the performers' income. For example, as of 2022, LiveJasmin is a popular webcam streaming service. LiveJasmin.com has around 300 million visitors a month.¹³ The website hosts a vast amount of web-cam models. In terms of earnings, LiveJasmin uses a multilevel earning system. As performers would rise in popularity on the website, they would have access to more of their earnings. A performer starting on LiveJasmin level one would only have access to 30% of their earnings. With the vast amount of performers on the website, it may be hard for performers to advance to higher levels where they would have more access to their earnings. Not just LiveJasmin but other webcam sites also take substantial amounts of earnings from their small performers. Thus some webcam performers were looking for an alternative option.¹⁴ Even within traditional adult entertainment companies, exploitative contracts benefit from a flat rate per scene. A sex worker could film a scene that pays only five thousand dollars. Even if their scene makes more than their original flat rate, sex workers do not have access to the royalties that their scene produces.

Mia Khalifa, a Lebanese American adult entertainment actress, was only in the adult entertainment industry for three months when she became one of the most popular adult entertainers. In a 2019 interview with Megan Abbott, Mia Khalifa claims to have only made around twelve thousand dollars throughout her career in the adult entertainment industry despite

¹² Jones, "I Get Paid to Have Orgasms."

¹³ Chris, Pleines, "LiveJasmin Review April 2022: Erotic Fantasy or Nightmare? - DatingScout," Datingscout.com, Accessed April 29, 2022, <https://www.datingscout.com/livejasmin/review>.

¹⁴ "LiveJasmin Reviews, Information and News," accessed May 1, 2022, <https://www.wecamgirls.com/reviews/livejasmin/>.

her popularity.¹⁵ When looking up Mia Khalifa on a popular adult entertainment streaming platform similar to youtube, Pornhub.com, she is ranked forty-eight and has over one billion streams.¹⁶ Not to mention the millions of pirated videos that appear on Pornhub.com and other adult entertainment websites. Despite her mass amount of streams, she still could not have access to the revenue because of the contract she signed.

Netflix distributed a popular documentary called "Hot Girls Wanted, " which chronicled the lives of new adult entertainers coming into the industry. Many women that are entering the adult entertainment industry are young. One of the main ways actresses navigate this industry is through talent agencies. Although talent agencies help new adult entertainers navigate adult entertainment industries, these agencies can also be exploitative. One of the adult entertainers also talks about how at first, the amount of money is enticing.¹⁷ However, women have a drastically lower retention rate within the industry as women tend to age out. Although there is a chance to make a large sum of money, a lot of the money depends on their popularity. Many actors and actresses use Twitter and other social media platforms to grow a fanbase not just for themselves but also to gain more popularity for their scenes. Some adult entertainers do have positive experiences working for mainstream adult entertainment companies, but many others who are not popular struggle with compensation. Mia Khalifa's story shines a light on an ongoing issue within the adult entertainment industry surrounding actress compensation. Most of

¹⁵ Megan Abbott, *Mia Khalifa Tells Her Story for the First Time*, Youtube.com, 2019, accessed April 29, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=igkv5JDgduA>.

¹⁶ "Mia Khalifa Porn Videos & HD Scene Trailers," Pornhub, accessed May 1, 2022, <https://www.pornhub.com/channels/mia-khalifa/videos?o=vi>.

¹⁷ Ronna Gradus and Jill Bauer, dirs. *Hot Girls Wanted*, Netflix, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80038162?source=35>.

the internet consumes their adult entertainment for free, or the content has been pirated from other websites.

Mia Khalifa is one story, but there are a multitude of adult actors that are not as popular as her that fall victim to exploitative contracts. As the public discourse around consuming pornography has become more acceptable, the conversation about ethical porn has arisen. The term “ethical porn” was first used on sex-positive blogs¹⁸ as feminists and sex-positive activists were trying to conceptualize a way to make adult entertainment ethical and guilt-free. Notably, the conversation surrounding the ethics of porn and ethical pornography is driven by the sex workers within the adult entertainment industry. Far too often, conversations surrounding the safety of sex workers leave said sex workers out of the conversation. With the rise of the idea of ethical pornography, sex workers were demanding change from within their community. Some of the main points of ethical pornography are safety, consent, respect, transparency, and fair pay. There was even an initiative spearheaded by a former dominatrix and journalist, Nichi Hodgson. She attempted to create the Ethical Porn Partnership, which would work with adult entertainment studios to develop an ethical certification.¹⁹ Websites such as Ethical.porn are dedicated to furthering the conversation surrounding the adult entertainment industry, as well as continuing the conversations in the feminist community about the ethnicity of adult entertainment in general.

¹⁸ Mark Hay and Lia Kantrowitz, “Makers of So-Called Ethical Porn Hope to Clean Up the Industry,” *Vice*, last modified July 20, 2017, accessed May 1, 2022, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/j5qkn8/makers-of-so-called-ethical-porn-hope-to-clean-up-the-industry>.

¹⁹ “What Is Ethical Porn? – Ethical Porn.” Accessed April 29, 2022. <http://ethicalporn.org/what-is-ethical-porn/>.

A Case Study on OnlyFans.com

The social media website OnlyFans was created in 2016 by an Entrepreneur named Timothy Stokely.²⁰ In 2018, seventy-five percent, a majority stake in the company was bought by American Entrepreneur Lenoid Radvinsky.²¹ People can access OnlyFans content through a paid subscription. As the pandemic became increasingly financially strenuous, people turned to OnlyFans as a way to create an income. Sex workers who have been in the adult entertainment industry also turned to OnlyFans. The platform itself offers performers a safer way to participate in the adult entertainment industry, the ability to create their own content and have ownership over their own intellectual property, which content creators found liberating. Within the standard adult entertainment industry, performers are paid a standard filming fee for a scene and no royalties from sales or streams. However, OnlyFans has a sliding price for subscriptions so that the creator can choose their subscription price. OnlyFans.com further protects its creators due to OnlyFans' involvement in the Digital Millennium Act, which gives content creators copyrights to their digital content.²² The website itself is popular for hosting adult entertainment which became more mainstream throughout the pandemic in 2020.

²⁰ Thomas Brewster, "The Shady, Secret History Of OnlyFans' Billionaire Owner," Forbes, accessed May 1, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/thomasbrewster/2021/06/16/the-shady-secret-history-of-onlyfans-billionaire-owner/>.

²¹ Brewster, "The Shady, Secret History Of OnlyFans' Billionaire Owner."

²² Mary Marston, "OnlyEmployees: The Ending of Misclassification of Digital Sex Workers in the Shared and Gig Economy," *American University Journal of Gender, Social Policy & the Law* 29 no.1 (2020): 89–122, accessed May 2, 2022, <https://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein.journals/ajgsp29&i=97>.

Thus OnlyFans opens the door for even more mainstream consumption of adult entertainment. It is important to talk about what makes something mainstream. The concept was broken down in the paper “Mainstreaming the Sex Industry: Economic Inclusion and Social Ambivalence” by Barbra G. Brents and Teela Sanders. Paper argues that the idea of the mainstream can be broken down into facets, the main ones being economical and social.²³ In terms of the economic mainstream, Brents and Sanders talk about the spread of adult entertainment into other business ventures that are not entirely oriented to the sex industry.²⁴ A key aspect which will be used in this paper is the horizontal economic integration.²⁵ Thus an adult entertainment business could also rely on another business in order to market other sexual businesses. In terms of OnlyFans, although they do not hide that there is adult content on their platform it is marketed as a social media platform. The adult content is behind a paywall it further distances the initial understanding of the platform from the adult content that most people know.

Although within this paper I am focusing on a lot of positive experiences with OnlyFans, it is important to note some of the controversies. For example, in 2020 OnlyFans went through a controversy involving actress Bella Thorne. Prior to the incident, OnlyFans did not have a cap on pay-per-view messages, which meant before people could set their pay per view images to over the current limit of fifty dollars.²⁶ When Bella Thorne initially joined the website she set her

²³ Robert Weitzer, “The Movement to Criminalize Sex Work in the United States,” *Journal of Law and Society* 37, no. 1 (March 2010): 61–84, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/j.1467-6478.2010.00495.x>.

²⁴ Weitzer, “The Movement to Criminalize Sex Work in the United States.”

²⁵ Weitzer, “The Movement to Criminalize Sex Work in the United States.”

²⁶ E. J. Dickson, “Has Bella Thorne Really ‘Ruined’ OnlyFans?,” *Rolling Stone*, August 28, 2020, accessed May 2, 2022,

pay-per-view photo price to two hundred dollars for nude pictures of herself. Yet, when people paid to see her photos they were shown something different than what she advertised on her Twitter account. In order to quell the backlash after that incident OnlyFans then put a cap on pay-per-view images. In a statement, they cited the reason being “Transaction limits are set to help prevent overspending and to allow our users to continue to use the site safely. We value all of the feedback received since this change was implemented and we will continue to review these limits.”²⁷ That abrupt change in policy limited the profit of sex workers who actually make their livings off OnlyFans. This was one of the main controversies that the website has faced. Another controversy OnlyFans faced in 2021 was when they decided to ban explicit content from their website. The announcement was made in August and would take effect in October.²⁸ The chief executive Tim Stokley claimed that banks were refusing payments that are synonymous with adult entertainment. Due to major banks distancing themselves from adult entertainment, OnlyFans.com decided to ban explicit content. In a statement made, OnlyFan said, “In order to ensure the long-term sustainability of our platform and continue to host an inclusive community of creators and fans, we must evolve our content guidelines.”²⁹ Due to this decision, the community was outraged. OnlyFans built a platform on the backs of sex workers, so it was a massive shock to the community when OnlyFans decided to spite the creators that helped establish the site's popularity. Due to the backlash that OnlyFans received only a few days later,

<https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/bella-thorne-onlyfans-twitter-pricing-changes-1051389/>.

²⁷ Dickson, “Has Bella Thorne Really ‘Ruined’ OnlyFans?”

²⁸ Eloise Barry, “Why OnlyFans Suddenly Reversed Its Decision to Ban Sexual Content,” Time.Com, last modified August 26, 2021, accessed April 29, 2022, <https://time.com/6092947/onlyfans-sexual-content-ban/>.

²⁹ Barry, “OnlyFans Suddenly Reversed Its Decision to Ban.”

they reversed the decision. They gave an official statement on their Twitter account saying, “thank you, everyone, for making your voices heard. We have secured assurances necessary to support our diverse creator community and have suspended the planned October 1 policy change. OnlyFans stands for inclusion, and we will continue to provide a home for all creators.”³⁰ Through the move to remove explicit content, they lost the trust of the core community which built the platform.

In terms of social mainstreaming, once the middle and upper classes consume something, it becomes mainstream. Mainstream celebrities have created OnlyFans content, further legitimizing the platform. However, there is a distinction between the adult content that the platform hosts and the safe for work content. OnlyFans.com is vast enough to escape the sole label as an adult entertainment streaming platform.

Established webcam performers were not the only group turning to OnlyFans as an option for putting up their videos, but during the Coronavirus pandemic, people were turning to OnlyFans for supplemental income and as a new way to find confidence. For example, Lindsay, who is a college student at the University of Cincinnati, said that it helped her battle with her body dysmorphias as well as gained a newfound confidence.³¹ Due to the position that OnlyFans holds within the public consciousness as the more palatable adult entertainment option, asserting oneself as an OnlyFans sex worker on OnlyFans has a different political weight.

³⁰ OnlyFans, Twitter Post, Accessed April 29, 2022.
<https://twitter.com/onlyfans/status/1430499277302816773>.

³¹ Tawney Beans, “UC Student Finds Confidence, Body Positivity Through OnlyFans,” The News Record, accessed May 2, 2022,
https://www.newsrecord.org/news/uc-student-finds-confidence-body-positivity-through-onlyfans/article_e10514ce-0c2e-11eb-959b-bbff14064de7.html.

With the surge in OnlyFans' popularity, conversations amongst feminists advanced the idea of sex work as liberating for women. For example, a prominent feminist thinker who is against sex work, Catharine Mackinnon, has claimed that "sex work implies that prostituted people want to do what they have virtually no choice in doing. That their poverty, homelessness, prior sexual abuse as children, subjection to racism, exclusion from gainful occupation or unequal pay plays no role."³² Mackinnon's claim may be true for some sex workers who join the industry, which violates their own autonomy and liberty. However, this thought fails to acknowledge sex workers who voluntarily join the industry and generalizes all sex workers as victims. In the book *Revolted Prostitutes*, the authors point out that delegitimizing and outlawing sex work does not rectify the aforementioned issues while also putting those who consensual practice sex work in further danger.³³ Simply writing off all sex work as exploitative is distinctly taking away the women's right to choose the work that they engage in. What should be critiqued is the circumstances of the industry and the social and moral war that continues to impede women who freely join the adult entertainment industry. OnlyFans.com holds an important space within society as a more palatable option for adult entertainment; while being a legitimate competitor to mainstream adult entertainment websites.

OnlyFans.com gives everyone the ability to be an adult entertainer as the only requirement to be on the website is to set up an account and have photos and videos to sell. Now more than ever, sex work has become a part of the mainstream consciousness. The emergence of

³² Catharine A. MacKinnon, "Opinion: OnlyFans Is Not a Safe Platform for 'Sex Work.' It's a Pimp," *The New York Times*, September 6, 2021, sec. Opinion, accessed May 2, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/06/opinion/onlyfans-sex-work-safety.html>.

³³ Molly Smith and Juno Mac, *Revolted Prostitutes: The Fight for Sex Workers' Rights* (London ; New York: Verso, 2018), 54.

the platform also forced the conversation about women's sexuality to the forefront.

OnlyFans.com has also challenged the general public to think about how they consume their adult entertainment. As well as forcing people to think of adult entertainers that produce the content they enjoy. Within this chapter, I have traced the emergence and evolution of digital pornography. As the internet has evolved, consequently internet adult entertainment has evolved. I make the argument that OnlyFans.com has revolutionized the online sex work industry. The ethnicity of mainstream internet pornography libraries has been challenged. OnlyFans.com gives the consumer and sex worker more transparency into the inner workings of adult entertainment websites. OnlyFans.com forces mainstream pornography companies to be more transparent about their practices.

OnlyFans.com has also centered itself in a long conversation among feminists. Within the feminist community, sex work is a contested issue. For the most part, feminists are split into two groups: anti-sex work feminists and pro-sex work feminists. The former believe that sex work normalizes prostitution and sex trafficking. As well as believes that sex work is favorable towards the patriarchy as it solely objectifies women. Anti-sex work feminists believe that OnlyFans.com normalizes prostitution. As well as caste sex work in an overall positive light while ignoring the circumstances as to why some women join the industry. The latter believes that women should be able to participate in a safe sex work environment and should not face societal repercussions for their occupation. As well sex work can be a form of liberation as they are taking defining their sexuality.

Chapter Two: A Look into the Feminist Conflict Surrounding

Sex Work

In the first chapter, I discussed the evolution of online sex work and how the modern online adult entertainment industry uses exploitative methods to steal from sex workers. I also examined how the online adult entertainment industry has changed due to the recent popularity of OnlyFans.com. Due to the recent popularity of the website, it has sparked continuing conversation among feminists about sex work.

In this chapter, I will be discussing the feminist discourse around sex work and establish the context for arguments in defense and critical of sex work. Gayle S. Rubin examines the complex relationship between sex and feminism in her piece “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality.”³⁴ She makes the distinctive point of the division between those who believe sex workers and the adult entertainment industry to be an extension of patriarchy and those who seek liberation through sex.³⁵ The former are feminists who lead the anti-pornography movement. My aim in this chapter is to revisit these claims and establish where OnlyFans.com falls within this conversation around sex work. It should also be made clear that feminists on both sides of the argument acknowledge that the discussion about sex work is not a “black and white” issue. There are many nuances and systemic and systematic issues surrounding sex work. The argument I will raise is that women should have the ability to join the

³⁴ Gayle S. Rubin, *Culture, Society, and Sexuality*, ed. Peter Aggleton and Richard Parker (Taylor & Francis Group, 2007), <https://sites.middlebury.edu/sexandsociety/files/2015/01/Rubin-Thinking-Sex.pdf>.

³⁵ Smith and Mac, *Revolted Prostitutes*, 41.

sex work industry free of retribution as well as still be a part of the feminist movement. I further suggest that sex workers should have the ability to be a part of the adult entertainment industry while simultaneously critiquing the industry.

Argument Against Sex Work

The argument against sex work is one that is against prostitution. Anti-sex work feminists believe that sex work fuels the ongoing oppression of women. The First Amendment of the US Constitution protects the exploitation of adult film actresses as it protects pornography.³⁶ Before fully diving into the theory as to why some feminists are against sex work and pornography, it is crucial to give context to the relationship that pornography and the First Amendment have within the United States as it is key to an argument used by anti-sex work advocates. There has been a long history between pornography and legality. Yet, there is a clear line between obscenity and pornography as First Amendment does not protect obscenity. There are two types of pornography that are not protected by the First Amendment which are obscenity and child pornography.³⁷ Child pornography is easier to define as it clearly involves a party that is unable to consent as it is harmful to minors. Yet, obscenity is harder to define. There have been many cases, some making it to the Supreme Court debating and trying to define obscenity. There were a few Supreme Court cases where the Court established a test that could determine if a piece of

³⁶ David L. Hudson Jr., "Obscenity and Pornography," The First Amendment Encyclopedia, last modified 2009, accessed May 2, 2022, <https://www.mtsu.edu/first-amendment/article/1004/obscenity-and-pornography>.

³⁷ Hudson Jr., "Obscenity and Pornography."

material was obscenity or not. For example, in *Roth v. The United States (1975)*.³⁸ The issue was the decision was about sending obscene material through the mail. This case determined that the Constitution does not protect obscene material. This decision also established that if the dominant theme of the material according to average community standards is obscene, then the material itself is not protected by The First Amendment.³⁹ This rigid understanding of obscenity was then challenged in the court case *Miller v. California (1973)*, where the judges were tasked to come up with new guidelines.⁴⁰ These guidelines are still being challenged especially within the digital era as it is easier to distribute obscene images.

Feminist theorists such as Cathrine A. Mackinnon, who is against sex work, have talked about the First Amendment protections against exploitative and obscene pornography that effect women. For example, within the Netflix documentary “*Hot Girls Wanted*,” adult film actress Ava Kelly talks about scenes she has done as one of the few women of color within this documentary. In that sense, she has a unique perspective that shows the intersectionality between sex and race. In the film she gets a call from a producer telling her to get “ghetto things” for the shoot. She was asked to get “skully’s, wife-beaters, white t-shirts, sweatpants and jeans.”⁴¹ All the items that she was told to acquire are rooted in disparaging stereotypes. She talks about how her first scene was called “Latina Abuse.”⁴² She explains how it was extremely degrading. Her race was being used as a prop for someone else’s sexual pleasure. The poster depicts “Latina Abuse” within the documentary with the tagline: “Watch them gag on gringo cocks,” clearly

³⁸ Hudson Jr., “Obscenity and Pornography.”

³⁹ Hudson Jr., “Obscenity and Pornography.”

⁴⁰ Hudson Jr., “Obscenity and Pornography.”

⁴¹ Gradus and Bauer, *Hot Girls Wanted*.

⁴² Gradus and Bauer, *Hot Girls Wanted*.

shows who this adult film is meant to reach.⁴³ This genre of pornography is also in conjunction with forced blow job and other forms of forced play depicted in the film. While the actor is consenting to the acts during the shoot, there is an implication of non-consensual sex. This also plays to the idea of the intersectionality of sex and violence as these forms of forced play are very popular on adult entertainment websites.

The depiction of violence against women for the sexual gratification of men is also a reason why some feminists critique pornography and sex work. Jada, also known as Ava Kelly, distinctly talks about the combination of sex and violence that makes sex scenes such as *Latina Abuse* so difficult to film and watch.⁴⁴ Jada remarks that there will always be supply and demand. In *Hot Girls Wanted*,⁴⁵ they give a staggering statistic that “in 2014, abuse pornography websites averaged over 60 million combined hits per month, that is more than nfl.com”⁴⁵ Although Jada personally sees it as a possible outlet for aggressive men, and she remarks that “at least they can watch me do it online through a computer instead of doing it to an actual girl,” an argument could be made that pornography scenes such as *Latina Abuse* could be a gateway to more violent sexual encounters.⁴⁶ The First Amendment protects such images where women of color are being degraded solely based on their ethnicity and race. It protects this form of pornography despite the violent degrading of some non-white women. Anti-sex work feminists are concerned that their exploitative images work in favor of the patriarchy. Pornography such as *Latina Abuse* and *facial Abuse* use women as objects. The sexual objectification of women has

⁴³ Gradus and Bauer, *Hot Girls Wanted*.

⁴⁴ Gradus and Bauer, *Hot Girls Wanted*.

⁴⁵ Gradus and Bauer, *Hot Girls Wanted*.

⁴⁶ Gradus and Bauer, *Hot Girls Wanted*.

been a long-standing problem. Due to the objectification of women, women can be seen as nothing more than objects of sexual desire.

Cathrine A. Mackinnon talks about the commodification of women's sexuality and the feminist ideology about accepting money from systems that are known to exploit adult film actresses. To examine that point and the women within the adult entertainment industry, Mackinnon turns to the Playboy publication. In her book "Feminism Unmodified" Mackinnon talks about the money that comes from Playboy and the contrasting theoretical understandings of what Playboy's money means in relation to women's liberation. With respect to the money, she argues: "One is that it is really our money. Playboy took and sold women's sexuality to make it in the first place, so we should use it in the interest of women to cushion or change the system that extracts it from us."⁴⁷ This theory believes in reclaiming the money and using it as reparations for women, which can help their liberation. Using the money from patriarchy to dismantle the patriarchy can aid in liberation. However, Catherine Mckinnon offers a counter perspective to taking money from Playboy. She claims that taking money from the oppressor puts the legitimacy of women's liberation at risk. She says:

"Even more, if much of Playboy's power against women derives from its legitimacy, and what its legitimacy, in turn, makes legitimate, we become part of their legitimacy support system when we accept their financial help. Taking their money, in this view, digs us deeper into the system we are fighting."⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Catherine A. MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1994), 134, <https://www.feministes-radicales.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/Catharine-MacKinnon-Feminism-Unmodified.-Discourses-on-life-and-law.pdf>.

⁴⁸ MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified*, 135.

To use Cathrine A Mckinnon's ideas within the context of the greater adult entertainment and sex work community, Mckinnon could be claiming that participating in sex work is inherently beneficial to patriarchy. The issue of legitimacy is an ongoing concern with anti-sex work feminists. Playboy is able to weaponize its power against women due to the publication's legitimacy. Further, Mckinnon claims that by women continuing to work for, and take money from, Playboy gives the publication more legitimacy. According to anti-sex work feminists this assertion applies to sex work. Since women continue to join the sex work industry it may work against the legitimacy of the women's liberation movement as well as the survivors of the sex work industry.

Anti-sex work advocates separate sex workers into two groups. The first being the "Happy Hooker" and the second, "Excited Women."⁴⁹ The former is a woman who enjoys the sex work trade and believes in its decriminalization. Since this stereotype of sex workers enjoy the sex work industry and believes in decriminalization, she is deemed not worthy of protection. She is also seen in direct opposition to women who have survived the sex work industry. The latter is a woman who has experienced trauma and harm within the sex work industry and believes in criminalization. The excited women stereotype is seen to be a victim that should be protected. These two stereotypes of women within the sex work industry are put in direct opposition. However, both stereotypes overgeneralize the experiences of women within the industry. Molly Smith and Juno Mac write about this anti-sex work feminist ideology, quoting Grace Dyas saying

⁴⁹ Smith and Mac, *Revolted Prostitutes*, 35.

“the excited perspective says, you need to see the harm done to me and the harm done to women everyday. The other side is like, you need to see I am enjoying it... So many women involved in sex work don't want to be there... But others are saying, “We’re also here; we’re enjoying it.””⁵⁰

Dyas does not acknowledge that there are sex workers who have experienced harm and do not enterally enjoy the sex work industry. Yet, they still believe in decriminalization. Anti-sex work feminists continuously fail to acknowledge the multitude of experiences women have within the sex work industry and deem any experience that is contradictory to their movement illegitimate. This ideology is used to dismantle sex work as anything that does not vilify or victimize sex workers and it goes directly against the efforts of women's liberation.

As in the case of Catharine Mackinnon, some feminist thinkers made the claim that “sex work implies that prostituted people really want to do what they have virtually no choice in doing. That their poverty, homelessness, prior sexual abuse as children, subjection to racism, exclusion from gainful occupation or unequal pay plays no role.”⁵¹ This may be true for some sex workers who join the industry and in those cases this would indeed be a violation of their autonomy and liberty. Mackinnon is claiming that using the term sex work belittles the experiences of those who have been forcibly introduced to the sex work industry. However, sex workers have themselves pushed back against this assertion as they want their legal profession to be separated from prostitution. In *Revolting Prostitutes* Molly Smith and Juno Mac quote the journalist Sarah Ditrum by saying, “Prostitution [is] an institution that insists on the

⁵⁰ Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*, 36.

⁵¹ Catharine A. MacKinnon, “Opinion: OnlyFans Is Not a Safe Platform for ‘Sex Work,’ It’s a Pimp,” *The New York Times*, September 6, 2021, sec. Opinion, accessed May 2, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/06/opinion/onlyfans-sex-work-safety.html>.

dehumanization of women, the grinding away of our souls so we become easier to fuck, easier to use, easier to kill. The use of “we” and “are” suggests that the experiences of sex worker...are a struggle shared with all women. (of course the same cannot be said in reverse; “women’s liberation” is not always shared with prostitutes).”⁵² Sex workers have long pushed back against the narrative of victimhood. Anti-sex work feminists benefit from generalizing sex work for the betterment of women’s liberation. However, sex workers do not have access and are not accepted in the women's liberation movement as due to their occupation, they are seen as contributing to the oppressive patriarchy.

An Argument for Sex Work

Before diving into the feminist argument in defense of sex work, it is important to address what we understand as work. Sex work is still a profession just like any other job. So in order to discuss the “morality of sex work, it is important to examine what kinds of work is considered ethical within a capitalist society. This would help us better address the question of how women working in sex work could push back against patriarchy.

A constant critique of sex work is that sex work is not “good work.”⁵³ This raises the question of if consensual sex work is not seen as legitimate work, then what is good work?⁵⁴ Within society, work is mostly relational and is deemed to be good. Although people struggle in their jobs in many ways, such as by waking up at obscene hours in order to make money, it is

⁵² Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*, 37.

⁵³ Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*, 41.

⁵⁴ Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*, 41.

seen as doing something you love. Although romantic, the underlying logic behind this claim is internalized capitalism. Doing what you love is subjective as is good work. This vague understanding of work is the key to what alienates erotic professionals. The book *Revolting Prostitutes* claims that the mainstream understanding of the motivation of the exotic professional is the same as any other worker. And this is the desire for a certain lifestyle that society deems successful. Both workers are motivated by the same goal, yet sex work is delegitimized as “bad work.”⁵⁵

Good work is supposed to be fulfilling, beneficial, and non-exploitative. On this basis, it is claimed that sex work is not good work, and anything other than good work is not considered work at all. There are many instances where workers are exploited yet, these jobs are still deemed to constitute good work. For example, *Revolting Prostitutes* points out unpaid internships. Although these interns are doing work that should and could be paid for, and even though they may be doing what they love, they are still being exploited for their labor. It is clear that morals dictate what is considered good work. Thus as long as there is a moral crusade against sex work, it will struggle to be seen as a legitimate form of work.

Moreover, throughout this conversation about the moral and ethical implications of sex work, actual sex workers are being spoken over, and are not given the ability to help in the creation of legislation that directly impacts the sex worker community. Although there are sex workers who are actively advocating for their right to consensually and safely practice sex work, it seems that they were not being heard. “*Revolting Prostitutes* points out a paradox:

⁵⁵ Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*, 44.

“Our ability to understand such assaults as rape depends on not understanding sex work as purchased consent, wherein sex workers hand over control of our boundaries and bodily rights with the exchange of cash.”⁵⁶

The understanding of sex work within the public consciousness is one of coercion. Although that does happen within the industry, it neglects the women who consensually join the industry. Nikita, a sex worker who addressed the Annual General Meeting of Amnesty International in 2017 is quoted as saying, “Part of believing me when I say I have been raped is believing me when I say I haven’t been.”⁵⁷ Nikita is speaking about the general ideology and the complicated history between women and sex. A woman's virtue used to be contingent on her being untouched sexually. There has also been the idea that penetration itself is dirty and ruins women. Further, the norms of monogamy suggest that women should only have sex with their life partners. Although this idea is archaic there are still remnants of this patriarchal system that binds women's sexuality. Thus society has a difficult time accepting and understanding women wanting to be in sex work. This point is furthered by Molly Smith and Juno Mac when they say:

“if we who sell sex are already degraded through penetration, then the further degradation of being written about as garbage cans, flesh holes, sperm receptacles, orifice, or blow-up dolls is seen as fact rather than actively reproducing and perpetuating misogynist discourse and all in the name of feminism.”⁵⁸

Due to the degrading literature surrounding sex workers, it is harder to advocate for better working conditions as well as acceptance of consensual sex work. Society is always already

⁵⁶ Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*, 44.

⁵⁷ Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*, 44.

⁵⁸ Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*, 45.

ready to condemn sex work, and sex workers do not have the same space to critique their profession due to the ongoing attack on their occupation. This ties back to the earlier examination of work. Not all work is seen as good or honest work. Interns who are underpaid and overutilized are still exploited by their employers, but they are not morally condemned for this, whereas sex workers often are. There are multiple reasons why someone would join the sex work industry. Some women join due to economic circumstances and others join the industry to find liberation. An example is Belle Knox. In 2014 news broke that a freshman at Duke University that goes by Belle Knox on the internet was paying for her education by being in adult films. This was a consensual choice that Knox made in order to pay for her expensive college degree. At Duke, she was a women's study and sociology major. Once the public found out about her career outside of school, news and radio stations were quick to slut shame her as well as question why someone who went to such a prestigious university would participate in the adult entertainment industry.⁵⁹ While in school she started as a waitress in order to pay for her college education, due to the low wages and treatment she received within her waitressing career, Belle Knox decided to start sex work, noting that "she found waitressing more degrading than the sex trade."⁶⁰ She then worked to make the transition into the adult entertainment industry. Her first scene was with the popular company Facial Abuse, which was mentioned in the Netflix documentary "*Hot Girls Wanted*."⁶¹ Belle Knox says that she consensually was a part of a scene in this film that was thought to be degrading. In order to protect herself after her experience with

⁵⁹ Alex Morris, "Duke Porn Star Belle Knox Tells All," Rolling Stone, last modified April 23, 2014, accessed May 2, 2022, <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/the-blue-devil-in-miss-belle-knox-meet-duke-porn-star-miriam-weeks-98167/>.

⁶⁰ Morris, "Duke Porn Star Belle Knox Tells All."

⁶¹ Gradus and Bauer, *Hot Girls Wanted*.

Facial Abuse, she signed with Matrix Models, an agency that specializes in booking adult entertainers. After signing with the company she felt more comfortable within the industry.⁶² After filming a few scenes, she gave an account of her experience when she started to get noticed around campus in a Rolling Stones article. She told a specific anecdote about a friend she had at the time that recognized her but then promised not to tell anyone.⁶³ The next day her friends' whole fraternity knew, launching her into infamy. As Knox noted in an interview with the Rolling Stones publication, due to the location of Duke University which is in the conservative Bible belt, she was battling some of the conservative values that some students hold.⁶⁴ After being exposed as an adult actress she became an advocate for women in porn. Belle Knox's story shows that there is a demographic of women who want to be in the adult entertainment industry as well as find power within the industry.

One way of rethinking this issue critically is offered by another adult film actress, Nina Hartley, who is a feminist who advocates for pornography.⁶⁵ Throughout her advocacy work, she associates sex work with the idea of autonomy, especially women's ability to make decisions without persecution from their community. Women's sexuality has long been controlled by patriarchy. In terms of patriarchy, sex is supposed to be gatekept by virtue. From this perspective, women taking control of the narrative by taking their sexuality into their own hands can be a

⁶² Morris, "Duke Porn Star Belle Knox Tells All."

⁶³ Morris, "Duke Porn Star Belle Knox Tells All."

⁶⁴ Morris, "Duke Porn Star Belle Knox Tells All."

⁶⁵ Ryan Shaffer, "Atheism, Ethics, and Pornography: An Interview with Nina Hartley," *The Humanist*, last modified August 26, 2010, accessed May 3, 2022, <https://thehumanist.com/magazine/september-october-2010/features/atheism-ethics-and-pornography-an-interview-with-nina-hartley/>.

direct challenge to the patriarchal idea of purity and virtue. Many consensual sex workers accordingly push back against the idea that their virtue and morals are lost.

Especially with the rise of access to the adult entertainment industry. and increasing public critique of popular pornography websites, people began to look for different and more ethical options to consume their adult entertainment. Within 2020 the world went through the Covid-19 pandemic, which left many people at home and without income. It is in this context that OnlyFans.com gained popularity, people turned to OnlyFans.com as another source of income as well as a source of empowerment. OnlyFans.com gave anyone the opportunity to join the adult entertainment industry and the ability to control the content and the scenes. Even established adult entertainers shifted to OnlyFans.com as there was a realized potential of having more autonomy and of which scenes they could participate in and keeping more of their income.

Chapter Three: Autonomy, Self-Definition and Sex Work

In chapter one, I examined the history of internet cam girls and pornography. The creation of large hosting websites shaped the landscape for adult entertainment and showed how OnlyFans.com had become a competitor to the mainstream adult entertainment industry. Due to OnlyFans.com's marketability and accessibility, many more people joined the adult entertainment industry, thus catapulting OnlyFans.com into the feminist discourse on the morality of the adult entertainment industry and sex work.

In chapter two, I discussed the conflict within the feminist community surrounding sex work. Although there are many gray areas within the conversation, I discussed two ideologies, anti-sex work feminists and pro-sex work feminists, and examined how OnlyFans.com fit in this conversation among feminists.

In this chapter, I turn to different theories of autonomy and apply those theories of autonomy to the current state of sex workers. I believe that being able to make a choice freely to join the sex work industry merely does not liberate sex workers and women's sexuality. Other forms of liberation are needed to fully bring sex work into the mainstream consciousness. Sex workers have identified the importance of choice and reclaimed the narrative surrounding sex work. To prove this point, I will use another theory commonly used in the black feminist canon, self-definition. Building on the insights provided by this canon, I will then discuss how OnlyFans.com could potentially inform the radical re-definition of sex work while also bringing the conversation of sex work into mainstream media.

A Look into Autonomy

In its basic understanding, autonomy is the ability to govern oneself. The ability to govern oneself comes with the expectation of self-consciousness. A condition of self-consciousness and autonomy is the idea of judgment.⁶⁶ Judgment is a collection of thoughts that add to a human's self-consciousness and helps them make decisions.⁶⁷ Without self-judgment, one can be argued that one does not have self-consciousness or autonomy. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy paraphrases Kant by saying: “In order to be self-conscious, I cannot be wholly absorbed in the contents of my perceptions but must distinguish myself from the rest of the world.”⁶⁸ To be self-conscious, one can not be fully engulfed in their own perceptions. Said perceptions could be the result of how individuals perceive the world and their place in it or how other people's perceptions of an individual may be internalized and shape their self-perception. The key to being self-conscious is the ability to acknowledge how perceptions emerge and how they affect individual judgments. It is impossible for anyone to be a wholly reasonable person who is entirely unaffected by the perceptions of others. Yet, there are some modes of self-perception that are influenced by the judgments of the oppressor. These

⁶⁶ Michael Rohlf, “Immanuel Kant,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Fall 2020. (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2020), accessed May 2, 2022, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/kant/>.

⁶⁷ Rohlf, “Immanuel Kant.”

⁶⁸ Rohlf, “Immanuel Kant.”

perceptions are not agreed upon but are societal norms and nuances that affect the reasoning and self-perception of the oppressed.

When sex work is thought through from this perspective, it is clear that patriarchy has done an abundance of work to define a woman's virtue. Although some of these understandings of virtue are archaic, these perceptions have long-standing effects on what some people morally believe about sex work. There is a common belief that their work is legitimate work. Yet, among sex workers, there are many sentiments surrounding their occupation. Some use sex work strictly as a means of income. Some believe that sex work can be liberating. The patriarchy's influence on women's sexuality has worked to police women's sexual liberation. The conversation surrounding sex work is dominated by the morality of sex work and tends to look over the many reasons women may choose to become sex workers. Centralizing the conversation around morals and various moral objections informed by patriarchy might affect sex workers also and generate internal tensions and degrading self-perceptions.

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel examines this idea of self-consciousness in proximity to others within his essay "Lordship and Bondage." When talking about the relationship between lord and bondsman, Hegel says, "Since to begin with they are unequal and opposed, their reflection into a unity has not yet been achieved, they exist as two opposed shapes of consciousness; one is the independent consciousness whose essential nature is to be for itself, the other is the dependent consciousness whose essential nature is simply to live or to be for another."⁶⁹ Both Hegel and Kant agree that to be certain of oneself, one must be put in the

⁶⁹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford University Press, 1977), 115, http://www.faculty.umb.edu/gary_zabel/Courses/Marxist_Philosophy/Hegel_and_Feuerbach_files/Hegel-Phenomenology-of-Spirit.pdf.

context of the rest of the world or the other. In Hegelian dialectic, opposites interact and generate a synthesis. When these two opposed consciousnesses meet, there is a struggle for certainty.

According to Hegel, the one who prevails is the lord, and the dependent one is the bondsman.

Complete freedom requires unbiased self-judgment, yet as Hegel implies with the lord and bondsman dialectic, the bondsman does not have an unbiased self-judgment due to the influence of the lord. The ability to govern oneself and freedom are the building blocks of autonomy. For someone to have the ability to govern themselves, they need the independence to deliberate and the ability to choose free of manipulation from outside parties. Hegel examines the influence of the lord on the self-consciousness of the bondsmen, arguing that “for what the bondsman does is really the action of the lord. The latter’s essential nature is to exist only for himself; he is the sheer negative power for whom the thing is nothing. Thus he is pure, essential action in this relationship, while the action of the bondsman is impure and unessential.”⁷⁰

When sex work is understood through Hegel’s dialectical perspective, the lord (or the dominant powers) can be seen as three groups of people, the first being the patriarchy. In order for the patriarchy to continuously be successful, there has to be someone to suppress. Concerning women, patriarchy works solely for itself and upholds its power; thus, anyone who disagrees or is directed against its power is then made dependent on it. In terms of sex workers, and since the liberation of women’s sexuality is a contradiction to the parameters set by patriarchy, it is then deemed a threat to its certainty. In order to protect the patriarchy’s certainty, it then shifts to condemn the women who join the sex work industry and moves to separate them from other women. The “Madonna-Whore complex” is born from within this context. The separation of

⁷⁰ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 116.

women works for the patriarchy as the women who enter the industry are seen as “whores” or pure objects of desire and are separated from other women. Dividing women into moral categories in this way also removes the protection of sex workers as they are deemed not worthy of protection, thus eliminating the threat to its certainty.

The second lord or dominant power in question is society. Although society could be directly influenced by the patriarchy itself (society could be the bondsmen to patriarchy), it works as its own lord to sex workers. Being a sex worker is still considered taboo. A sex worker’s existence is highly political. Women joining the sex-work industry also become political pawns sex-work is seen as parallel to poverty, substance abuse, and incarceration. The United States is a classist society, and to uphold classism, there has to be a group of people below the elites. Although sex workers may not be directly under the highly affluent, it trickles down to moral elitism among vulnerable populations. Instead of investigating the societal failures that may cause someone to join the adult sex work industry for financial reasons, the social critique takes the form of moral condemnation of those who enter the sex-work industry. This gives people below elites the ability to duplicate the exact oppressive nature that the elites inflict on society. Due to this judgment, if a sex worker were to leave or age out of the industry, it would be difficult to find a job after being a sex worker. The stereotypes of a sex worker supersede the abilities of individuals who apply for mainstream jobs, thus continuing the cycle of keeping sex workers as the bondsmen of society.

The third lord to sex workers is anti-sex-work feminists. One of the main critiques of sex work and porn is that it caters to men's desires. Yet, this broad assumption ignores feminist sex workers who joined the industry for their own sexual liberation. Policing other women’s sexual

autonomy also works in favor of the patriarchy, as women do not have the choice in how they express their sexuality. Acts of liberation should be up to the person who seeks liberation.

Another critique of sex work is that sex work makes light of prostitution and forced entry into the sex work industry. Although the concern of coercion and sex trafficking is a valid concern, instead of highlighting sex trafficking and pointing to the flaws within the sex-work industry, the argument circulates around villainizing sex work in general while also over-generalizing women who join the industry as victims with no autonomy. The overgeneralization of sex workers creates a divide between pro and anti-sex work activists. The sex workers who are feminists may not be able to seek support from a broader community of feminists. For anti-sex-work feminists to have certainty and dominance, they must impose their ideology on sex workers.

Overall, sex workers are oppressed by three different lords, thus making it difficult for them to gain liberation. The hypocrisy of being oppressed by other feminists is apparent, as sex workers who are feminists are also working towards women's liberation. Yet, their contributions to the feminist movement are devalued due to the reputation of their occupation. If feminism works towards the liberation and equity for women, why are sex workers excluded from the conversation? It is also important to mention that the case of sex workers' oppression and exclusion from the feminist movement is not an isolated incidence. Many other marginalized groups have also been denied access to the feminist movement. They were expelled from the movement due to their marginalization from society. So many women within the feminist movement have found that they did not have access to the sisterhood of feminism. As a result, these marginalized communities have had to adapt to the protection systems granted to them by their oppressors.

Marginalized individuals in this context take up the identity of the bondsmen while the oppressors take on the role of the lord. Due to the Lord's control on the bondsmen, for marginalized individuals, the disparaging preconceptions of their oppressors tend to echo their reality. Sojourner truth explained this dilemma in her piece, "Ain't I a Women," where she compares the treatment of white women in the south to that of enslaved women. She speaks about how men are supposed to treat women kindly. Yet she points out that she is not receiving the same treatment. Truth has never had any of these experiences that white women commonly have; thus, she asks if she is even a woman. Sojourner Truth knows and asserts that she is a woman. Yet, due to the oppressors' perception of black women and the world in which she lives in, it guides Sojourner Truth to undermine her own reason and ask the question if she is a woman. By writing this piece, Sojourner Truth takes back power as she critiques the oppressor's preconceived notions about black womanhood. By directly pointing out the hypocrisy within the lordship's argument against her womanhood, Sojourner Truth raises a more significant question. "What does not make her a woman?" Sex workers are similarly subjected to other people's conceptions of womanhood. In many ways, the moral repression of sex work requires the self-denial of their womanhood. According to the patriarchy, only a specific idea of a woman deserves protection. Deeming sex workers as women undeserving of security makes it easier to dismantle sex work.

The oppressors' perception may shape the broader reality of the oppressed perception. The outside manipulation makes it hard for marginalized voices to be able to freely act on their autonomy in a systematic way, which further oppresses an individual. The judgments made under these conditions of inequality and oppression would be determined by the oppressor and

thus be tainted. Sometimes, even one's seemingly subjective perceptions can be influenced/shaped by oppression and moral pressure.

In terms of some sex workers, the internal tensions they may harbor about their occupation may be caused by other people's perceptions; The fear of retribution and rejection from the feminist community outweighs sex workers' personal internal objections. It is entirely plausible that a sex worker could have moral objections to sex work herself, yet, autonomous judgment requires social conditions whereby sex workers have the ability to make judgments for themselves and for their community free from the norms that oppressors have set for them. Women should be able to freely and safely join the sex work industry without penalty from their community. In order to have the freedom to make that choice, there has to be a new way to prove certainty and break away from the certainty of the oppressor.

Self Definition

Sex workers should have the ability to define themselves in ways independent from patriarchy and the larger society. Sex workers have already gone through a version of self-definition as sex workers fought to have their profession be referred to as "sex work" instead of prostitution. The term sex work acknowledges that sex work is work. Far too often is sex work seen as illegitimate work because it is criminalized. The term prostitute also generalizes the individuals who consensually join the sex work industry. Using the term sex worker separates a legal profession from illegal, exploitative prostitution and sex trafficking. Like any other job, sex

workers might have mixed feelings about their careers. Not every sex worker likes or enjoys sex work, but the same argument can be made about jobs in all industries. It is vital that anyone who wants to join the sex work and adult entertainment industry should be free to join. Sex workers are regularly advocating for the adequate treatment of individuals within their industry. Yet, specifically within the context of feminism, they have always been denied the autonomy to dictate what is best for their communities. This is why self-definition is a vital tool for the liberation of sex workers.

The idea of self-definition, which is regularly used within the black feminist tradition, calls for liberation through self-definition. Patricia Collins, a black feminist theorist, defined the self not “as the increased autonomy gained by separating oneself from others.” Instead, Hill Collins argues, “self is found in the context of family, and community-as Paule Marshall describes it as ‘the ability to recognize one’s community with the larger community.’”⁷¹ Yet, it has been extremely hard for sex workers who are feminists to be in a community with anti-sex work feminists. Within the feminist community, there is a divide between pro and anti-sex work activists. Within both spectrums of ideologies, there is a consensus on the goal of liberating women.

Defining sex work as disconnected from feminism works to delegitimize sex workers and the movement they created. Sex workers have always been a part of the feminist movement. Far too often, the feminist movement has left out marginalized women to further the movement. Anti-sex work advocates who specifically are against sex work due to the patriarchal implications argue that sex work is inherently exploitative. Thus putting sex workers in direct

⁷¹ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 124.

opposition to the liberation of women. As well as anti-sex work feminists conflating all sex work with prostitution puts sex workers in a position where they are victims; this takes away agency from sex workers who joined the industry willingly. This gives anti-sex work feminists the ability to then employ their power over sex workers in the name of helping victims.

As marginalized individuals tend to adopt the systems of their oppressors, this directly impedes their ability to make choices autonomously. Adopting oppressors' systems and perceptions while living with one's perceptions creates two separate lives. Patricia Hill Collins quotes Audrey Lord to advance this argument: "becoming familiar with the language in the unmannered of the oppressor even sometimes adopting them for illusions of protection."⁷² This is not to argue that anti-sex work feminists are not working on their own agency while advocating for sex work. Yet, to recall the Hegelian paradigm, they use the modes of protection that the Lord uses to oppress the bondsman. Both use methods of victimhood to overgeneralize sex workers within the industry; this works in favor of patriarchy and its objectives. Both groups are working for women's liberation, yet being a part of the feminist community, there should be an expectation of sisterhood. Some women have used the adult entertainment industry to empower themselves and learn self-acceptance. Yet, the path they chose to strengthen their self-esteem is unacceptable. Women are not allowed to explore their sexuality without consequences. Sex workers are met with ridicule for their profession; thus, they aren't even getting protection from people within their community. Sex workers for decades have advocated for safer working environments and access to more of their wages. There is an apparent disconnect between what they advocate for and what other people believe is best for sex workers.

⁷² Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 107.

OnlyFans.com puts the power back into the sex-workers hands. Some sex workers on OnlyFans.com have the ability to create safe working environments. They have more control over their funds and complete creative control over the content they post. OnlyFans.com, throughout its creation, had sex workers in mind. While creating the platform, they had sex workers as consultants to ensure the platform addressed many concerns within the mainstream adult entertainment industry. OnlyFans.com has also helped women find self-esteem and confidence. It is not necessarily about the attention gained from posting pictures but the confidence gained while creating the content. OnlyFans.com helps with autonomy for sex workers and people newly joining the industry. Anti-sex work feminists argue that sex work and pornography only work in favor of patriarchy. Yet, it works to break away from lordship (or domination) also because women are able to dictate the content and scenes in which they participate. Giving women the ability to safely and freely explore their sexuality works against domination. OnlyFans.com also attempts to eliminate the exploitation of established pornography websites.

Moreover, due to the mainstream success of OnlyFans.com, more people are joining the sex work industry. The feminist movement should shift from trying to prevent sex work to pushing legislators to protect sex workers. OnlyFans.com has helped in the redefinition of sex work while also creating a platform for adult content, where sex workers can be fairly compensated.

Women should be able to choose to join the adult entertainment industry and participate in the feminist movement. The treatment of individuals within their communities echoes how the rest of society treats said, individuals. If the feminist community does not respect sex workers

who are also working for the liberation of women, there can not be true liberation of all women. Due to the history of marginalization of sex workers within the feminist movement, sex workers have created a community inside the feminist community. They have created resources for themselves to keep each other safe. Thus within this smaller community, they were able to redefine the word prostitute into a sex worker, thus giving them more agency over their profession. In order to break away from the patriarchy's hold, there needs to be a collaborative effort toward a radical redefinition of sex work, with sex workers leading the movement.

Hegel has also talked about self-definition as a path to liberation saying that “through this rediscovery of himself by himself, the bondsman realizes that it is precisely in his work wherein he seemed to have only an alienated existence that he acquires a mind of his own.”⁷³ Similar to self-definition, Hegel is saying that the bondsman only finds his existence through rediscovery and transformation of himself. This is the case for sex workers as having the ability to rediscover and self-define themselves in the context of sex work is the only way to break away from the oppressive hold of the lordship.

Sex workers have created multiple resources in order to educate society. Strippers United, which advocates for safer and more equitable working environments for strippers, is a good example. Their website is dedicated to resources and learning material to help sex workers know their rights and advocate for more equitable spaces.⁷⁴ This is an example of how sex workers had to come up with their own independent resources, due to the marginalization they face throughout society. Sex workers have had to develop their own interpersonal infrastructures in order to protect their peers within the industry.

⁷³ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 119.

⁷⁴“Strippers United,” Strippers United, accessed May 2, 2022, <https://www.strippersunited.org>.

Within their statement on their website Strippers United makes an interesting point saying “We are not looking for “platforms” for us to voice our views. We are not looking to be spoken for. We are not looking for paternalistic governmental surveillance under the veil of “legalization”....We are not playing into respectability politics. We are not disposable...”⁷⁵ What Strippers United is saying here is that the platform that they have created is one made for strippers by strippers. They are no longer asking for cloaked attempts of activism by those who want to abolish sex work. They are specifically working to protect sex workers because of the lack of protection society has given them. Sex workers have mobilized and continuously struggle for what is the best way to protect people within their profession. It is about listening to what sex workers want and casting aside preconceived notions about sex work. Breaking away from the lordship of the patriarchy needs more than just dismantling sex work. In order for women to be liberated from the patriarchy and live within their own autonomy, all women must find liberation. If women are tasked with finding their own self-esteem and self-worth, all paths in doing so should be open. Liberation is only attained when every woman is able to have autonomy and choice.

⁷⁵ “Strippers United.”

Conclusion

A sex worker's life is inherently political. Multiple levels of their identity have been marginalized by society. Their very existence disrupts society, as they actively are against the patriarchal conventions about women. The 2020 Covid-19 pandemic and the rise of OnlyFans.com have catapulted sex workers back into the mainstream discussion. Many people are now more aware of sex workers and some of their struggles within the industry. Due to the accessibility of OnlyFans.com, more people have joined the adult entertainment industry. In my senior project, I explore the history of online sex work and OnlyFans.com's impact on the online sex workspace. I approached this topic from the perspective of debates in feminism about sex work and where OnlyFans.com falls within that discourse. In this context investigated two theorists', Immanuel Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, ideas about autonomy and then applied them to the current situations of sex workers. I finally turned to the black feminist tradition and its understanding of self-definition. I argue that self-definition is a tool for sex workers to break away from their multiple bondsmen which are the patriarchy, society, and anti-sex work feminists.

In the first chapter, I established the history of internet pornography and adult entertainment. As the internet evolved, online adult entertainment has evolved. One of the first webcam models Jennifer Ridgely set the precedent for what would become the digital sex work trade. As well as bulletin websites were the blueprint for modern pornography libraries. In the first chapter, I also examined some of the sentiments about the mainstream adult entertainment industry. I ended my chapter with an overview of OnlyFans.com and how it has made an impact

on the modern online adult entertainment industry. As OnlyFans.com rose to popularity when people were critically thinking about the pornography they were consuming.

In the second chapter, I discussed the feminist argument for and against sex work in the second chapter. Both anti-sex work and pro-sex work feminists are working towards women's liberation. Yet, there is still a struggle to understand how sex work fits within the feminist movement. In the second chapter, I dived into both groups' arguments. Anti-sex work feminists believe that sex work is a way to whitewash prostitution and sex trafficking. Pro sex work activists, in contrast, believe that sex work is legitimate work. Sex workers struggle to bring attention to how sex work is legitimate work. Due to the social understanding of sex work and the archaic societal conventions towards/about women and sex. For some sex workers, sex work is just a job. They advocate that women within sex work should be able to practice their occupation within a safe environment. Pro sex work activists also believe that sex work can be a path towards liberation. Many women during the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic joined OnlyFans.com not just as another source of income, but as a way to find confidence and get back in touch with their sexuality. I end the second chapter by examining how anti-sex and pro-sex work activists think of OnlyFans.com.

In the final chapter, I discussed Emmanuel Kant's and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's theories of self-consciousness and bondage and applied them to sex workers. Starting my third chapter with a brief examination of autonomy gave me a better basis on how to examine the autonomy of sex workers. Both theorists believe that to be certain of their autonomy, a person's consciousness has to be compared to the consciousness of someone else. In order to examine this idea of autonomy, I introduced the Hegelian dialectic on the lordship and bondmen. Hegel

believes that in order to be certain of one's autonomy, it has to be tested by another person's autonomy. Going further, Hegel believes that through this confrontation between two consciousnesses, a winner employs their autonomy onto someone else, the former being the lordship and the latter being the bondsman. Introducing the lordship and bondsman dialectic allowed me to examine the different levels of oppression that sex workers face. Then by building upon the black feminist theory of self-definition, I examined how redefining the terms of one's self-consciousness can work towards liberation. Currently, the consciousness of the patriarchy, society, and anti-sex work feminism affect the autonomy and self-consciousness of sex workers. I argue that self-definition allows sex workers to define their consciousnesses within the sex work community. OnlyFans.com can be helpful in the effort to redefine sex work, as the website directly puts the power and control into sex workers' hands. OnlyFans.com could also be a direct answer to the call for ethical pornography as sex workers have the ability to dictate the environment in which they work. Further, sex workers are fairly compensated for their work and have access to more of their funds generated from the website. They can create content that revolves around their interests. It is a sex worker's choice if she wants to pander to the male gaze.

Sex work and the individuals who work within the adult entertainment industry are under attack not just on an interpersonal level but also on a legislative level as there has been an active effort to delegitimize sex work.

An important insight this analysis has generated is that sex work communities have to keep each other safe in the face of these legislative assaults. Sex workers have constantly pressured their state officials to help pass legislation collaborating with sex workers. Yet, the state has ulterior motives as its attempts to protect individuals within the sex-work industry are

actually harmful to the people within the sex work industry. While the United States tried to pass legislation to protect sex workers, these legislations have actually caused great harm to the interpersonal infrastructures that sex workers themselves created. Sex workers are actively working to redefine their space within the feminist community and society. Due to the recent resurgence of the mainstreaming of the sex work industry, the societal sentiment towards sex work and sex workers is slowly changing. Sex workers have continuously advocated for what they believe will aid their community. However, legislative efforts have failed to include sex workers in the conception. Lawmakers are attempting to pass legislation separate from the sex work community, thus collectives such as Strippers United are casting away the legislative help and strictly creating resources for their communities. At this moment in time, I question why sex workers should continue to extend to a greater community that actively works against them. There is no need to conform to the conventions of women's sexuality that the patriarchy has set. Anti-sex work feminists are putting sex workers at risk, by overgeneralizing their experiences. The legislative body is passing legislation that diminishes the interpersonal infrastructure that sex workers have created. I encourage those outside of the sex work community to stand up by sitting back. Listen to sex workers who have created resources that dictate how to keep them safe.

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