Article – Theme section

The bodies of the (digitised) body
Experiences of sexual(ised) work on OnlyFans

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Abstract

OnlyFans has enjoyed increasing attention from media and from users and consumers, especially since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, and particularly amongst Internet-savy emerging adults. We used semi-structured interviews to collect testimonies from young Italian women (N = 20) who sell their own sexual(ised) content on OnlyFans and processed them through Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Through this process, we sought to explore how different bodies are conceptualised in relation to content production, and how labour takes somatic existence in multiple ways. We looked at 1) how the body is prepared to be presented and mediatised, 2) how its presentation is conceptualised and actualised, and 3) how that work of representation, as a work of networking and therefore where bodily energy is invested and expended. Through this, we show how there are multiple, concurrent, and at times contradictory, narratives about corporality, and that potency and healing coexist alongside exhaustion.

Keywords
OnlyFans, pornography, gender, platformisation, gig economy, technologies of the self

Introduction

Research on/with young, emerging adults (Arnett, 2000; Buhl & Lanz, 2007) and sexual(ised) media is often framed in terms of empowerment or victimisation, while media use is often reduced to media effects (assumed to be either positive or negative) (Attwood et al., 2018); debates around new media tend to situate themselves as for or against technology and their impact (Kember & Zylinska, 2012). Moreover, research and social action focuses on protection from a risk-averse culture – which assumes that users are proactive but still somehow lacking in their competences.

Although since the early noughties work on young people, sexuality, and the media has increased, research on young adults and their experiences with sexuality in mainstream and online media is still scarce. Equally, work on porn production and online sex workers (Berg, 2017) is still limited, while there is an identifiable gap in research on young adult producers. At the same time, OnlyFans, a popular feature of dating and sexual content platforms, is also under-researched in comparison with their increasing popularity among users (Ryan, 2019); at the time of writing, Google Scholar listed a mere 265 references alluding to OnlyFans (as compared, for example, with over 1.7 million for Instagram). Last but not least, Covid-19's impact on online/offline intimacies has been swift, thereby creating a space for exploring the social and cultural specificities of sexual cultures across the globe through the lens of the changes brought by such a crisis. Nevertheless, the work published on the matter so far mostly reflects concerns about the replacement of romantic, "real-life" intimacy with casual online forms of sexual performance (Lopes et al., 2020).

Considering the impact these recent events have had on younger women, their specific challenges within patriarchal societies, and the way in which work in general (and sex work in particular) is heavily gendered, we have as a research question: "How are women's bodies mobilised in the production of online sexual(ised) work on OnlyFans?" Through this research question, we sought to understand the various ways in which corporality comes into play when women are preparing (themselves as) content to upload on OnlyFans, and how that corporality can in fact be understood as having several layers and, far more than objectification, might also create spaces for self-actualisation and self-reflexive work. If objectification is here understood as a devaluing of the self, a rendering of a subject into mere object, then we argue that such a concept does not suffice to address all the ways in which self-reflexive work through OnlyFans content creation is lived according to our respondents.

This does not mean that such self-reflexivity is inherently emancipatory or normative, but rather that it opens up the subject to itself and allows for a narrative of changes and transformations that happen both bodily and conceptually, both individually and within a social context. Furthermore, we have looked into how these acts carry with them the full weight of the word "work", inasmuch as they often implicate the survival and eco-

nomic subsistence of our interviewees, or a complementary mode of financing their basic requirements when it comes to studying or renting.

OnlyFans

OnlyFans can be described as a content subscription service. It was created in September 2016 and is based in London, UK. On the OnlyFans website, content creators can upload their writing, photos, and videos, and ask people (their "fans") to pay a monthly subscription to access that content, just as they can send content and messages to those "fans" and require a payment for them to see the content (usually called PPV, or pay per view).

After a slow start, the platform began attracting people who were already doing other forms of sex work – digital or not – as it allowed them to create and sell custom content to "fans", keeping 80 pct. of the value charged, without any limitations to how much or how little that would be. A sort of idealised system of "supply and demand" was thus created, and sex workers who were already doing pornography in other contexts started flocking to the platform, as well as people who had never done it before. Ever since the Covid-19 lockdown happened, OnlyFans has been featured in news pieces all around the world several times, amplifying mainstream awareness of its existence.[1] Content in this platform is often aligned with wider transformations in the area of sexual(ised) content production (Hardy, 2009), with the rise of the alternative, amateur, and gonzo styles (Smith, 2018; Stella, 2016; Williams, 1999). It also dovetails with wider transformations in the area of labour, and the rise of the "gig economy" and "platformed labour" as a contemporary, high-tech extension of temporary labour; in this, OnlyFans sits side by side with other services like Uber or AirBnB (van Doorn, 2017), as we explore further below.

The path towards the representation of ordinary lives is intertwined with broader changes in digital media, namely the rise in DIY productions, which could be considered a "direct challenge to the polished look of a big-budget screen production" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 566). In this way, the *mise-en-scène* of the authentic takes place. The representation of bodies and sexuality goes beyond the illusion of transparency that is often seen to define pornography: "Developments in amateur porn, web cams and gonzo constitute new stylistic strategies that promise an unproblematically transparent access to the real" (Saunders, 2019, p. 7). As Patterson (2004) has shown, amateur porn websites offer the opportunity to follow an ordinary person through their mundane everyday activities and to engage in limited interaction with their audience. As Hardy underlines, "This offers the consumer the experience of having a real, albeit circumscribed, interaction with a real girl, as opposed to simply looking at images of an inaccessible performer giving an over-played performance" (2008, p. 62).

This means that the way bodies are presented, shaped, and curated aims at producing an appearance of non-production. In this seeming contradiction, how a body is perceived by a content producer, and how it is produced to meet their expectations of what

might generate more engagement, puts into clear relief that there are multiple "bodies" involved, and that "body" represents a set of potential configurations to be deployed, discovered, and rearticulated according to various, and sometimes conflicting, narratives.

The body as an assemblage
– creative, embodied, and platformed labour(s)

To focus on how the body is produced is to refuse an immanent definition of "body" as a unitary, self-contained, and self-evident system. To this end, we refer to a theoretical framework that considers the ways "body" is defined, and how the instabilities of those definitions might operate against a definitive ontology of the body.

Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) notion of assemblage shows that, more than a fleshed-out theory, the idea of assemblage has to do with the opening up of potentially new and different ways to address how certain experiences come into cognition – how certain things become knowable as such. This approach has two main consequences, according to Thomas Nail (2017, p. 22), "the rejection of unity in favour of multiplicity, and the rejection of essence in favour of events".

These consequences are precisely the crux of the work we undertake in this article. Our goal is to understand exactly by which processes, discourses, and technological systems of mediation do our respondents constitute their own bodies – not in the sense of a unified body per person, but in the sense of multiple modes of configuring corporality. Each subject constructs their experience of having and being a body – and, by extension, their subjectivity – by deploying diverse modes of meaning-making in what concerns what "body" is, what it should be, and how other bodies are also recognisable as such (Currier, 2003, 2010).

As we will explore, this also assumes an articulation with Foucauldian thought on subjectivities as contingent constructions and the result of technological operations (Cascais, 1993; Foucault, 2000a, 2000b). We address below the main elements that, we argue, are at play in how bodily assemblages, and subjectivities, are produced in the context of producing sexual(ised) content for OnlyFans.

The first dimension of this process of assemblage is self-branding, which is the process by which subjects construct and manage a coherent online identity, share material relevant to a specific audience, and construct a loyal following on social media (Marwick, 2013; Senft, 2013; Whitmer, 2019). There are two direct implications of this: one, the materials our participants create in this platform are products of labour; and two, the labour they perform is not limited to the production of those materials. Therefore, it is fundamental to understand the constraints and conditions under which these activities constitute themselves as labour, and what types of labour are involved.

As digital media have become a normalised staple of everyday life and a main organiser of contemporary societies (Castells, 2010), data itself has become a fundamental and

valuable commodity, its commodification conterminous with a reorganisation of physical experiences of labour. Those transformations are encapsulated in the terms gig economy, platform labour, and others, and are part of a concurrent tendency, both on an economical and on a sociological dimension: neoliberalism and individualisation. Economically speaking, van Doorn (2017) points out a series of international shifts, dating back to the 1980s, pertaining to increased fiscal austerity, liberalisation of international trade relations (associated with labour market globalisation), and the advent of temporary staffing agencies. Together, these different macroeconomic and social changes brought about a restructuring of the labour market, "putting further downward pressure on national wages and weakening international labour solidarity" (van Doorn, 2017, p. 901). As a result, there was a "reduction of trade barriers and enhanced capital mobility [which], together with the application of new information-based technologies, facilitated the emergence of less constrained multinational corporations" (Hermann, 2007, p. 62).

Such corporations present themselves outwardly, in the digital space, under the guise of platforms, such as OnlyFans. van Doorn (2017, p. 901) points out how these companies need to be understood as "*platform labour intermediaries* that […] operate as new players in a dynamic temporary staffing industry […] augmented by a more austere and zero-liability peer-to-peer model that leverages software to optimize labour's flexibility, scalability, tractability, and its fragmentation [emphasis original]", in a way that expresses itself in specifically gendered and racialised ways. This model operates by providing workforce-as-a-service (van Doorn, 2017). Among the areas that have been hit the most are creative industries, and creative labour overall. The arts are a fertile ground to promote an ideal "unique" individual that expresses authenticity in the art they produce – authenticity serves as a form of accruing value (Abbing, 2002), while denying its connection to capital.

The creation of artistic products is no longer seen as sufficient, and social media is often a mixed space of creative work dissemination, capturing funding, marketing, and even production: "the creator must add intimate and authentic elements top the transaction in order to satisfy the expectations of the […] fan" (Hair, 2021, p. 202). In this regard "[artists] also exemplify the individualized risks, responsibilities and precariousness of contemporary work" (Baym, 2019, p. 8), and such efforts are untethered in terms of space, time, or any legal or contractual constraints, where every moment can be transformed into relational work.

"Neoliberalism makes us *all* 'aesthetic entrepreneurs' [emphasis original]" (Elias et al., 2017, p. 5), where the aesthetic dimension encompasses more than what the creator or the audiences would define as the artistic works. The portfolio of the artist (Scolere, 2019), while relevant, is not the whole of the process. Immaterial labour (Paasonen, 2010) can be seen as an overarching concept that aims to capture all forms of non-physical value production, and which often have an emotional component (Brents & Jackson, 2013; Grandey et al., 2013; Laurin, 2019).

A second dimension in the assemblage work of bodies has to do with the connection between authenticity and self-branding (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Faleatua, 2018). According to Banet-Weiser (2012, p. 80), to construct a successful self-brand, "one not only has to brand oneself as authentic but literally has to be authentic". Banet-Weiser frames authenticity as the process within oneself that makes oneself open to the others, repackaged and presented for the extraction of value. Different forms of repackaging and presenting bodies can be seen as elements in the process of assemblage mentioned before.

Being "authentic" involves the disclosure of the self and the manipulation of bodily self-presentation in order to enlarge the followers' base, such as what so-called influencers and micro-celebrities already do (Abidin, 2016; Zappavigna, 2016). According to Pezzuto (2019), the use of techniques connected to self-branding often involves a process of ongoing self-surveillance. Marwick (2013) describes it as "maintaining a dual gaze", a process that puts creators in a continuous measurement of themselves against competitors – again, elements that accrue into the assemblage of bodies in a continuous, non-discrete, and non-univocal process.

Self-presentation on social media "become[s] a currency that can be traded and converted[,] that can open new economic opportunities as the self itself becomes a commodity for online advertising" (Ryan, 2019, pp. 4–5), which in turn drives more pressure onto the content producer to feed into these practices of self-presentation. The affordances and uses of these platforms also place constraints and demands on the type of content created, and how authenticity is interwoven into them. Elizabeth Bernstein (2007) calls this "bounded authenticity", aimed not only at producing an outwards perception of authenticity, but also mandating that the work feels meaningfully authentic to the workers themselves. As Andrijavesic (2010, p. 5) writes:

> … the redrawing of the boundaries between public and private life and intimacy and commerce has transformed sex work to such an extent that [it …] is no longer grounded in its opposition to the private sphere, but is invested by the emotional and affective labour once associated with the intimate or domestic.

This carries the "promise [of] social intimacy between celebrities and audiences as they are presenting themselves *directly* and *immediately* [emphasis original]" (Jorge, 2020, p. 2), even though they do so through the mediation of digital platforms. Hair (2021, p. 209) notes how this "parasocial relational work" has not been addressed properly in research, especially when it comes to "patronage platforms", such as OnlyFans.

Under a regime of self-surveillance, users continuously select and choose specific aspects of themselves to show because they are suitable for work (or not). So, authenticity discourses can be reframed, considering that users are required to present a specific image of themselves (Senft, 2013), through a confessional approach (van Doorn, 2010), which we here understand to be part of the assemblage process of body production.

While most of these authors look at how authenticity is produced, our objective is not to inquire about authenticity as the final product, but to frame authenticity alongside other phenomena as an organising narrative in the production of bodily assemblages. As we will show, discourses around authenticity are not shared or deployed by all participants, and they exist alongside other elements. Andrejevic (2004) explains, for example, the importance of being watched. An invitation to participate feeds into a desire for democracy and community that then subsumes people into a self- and other-managed panopticon (Andrejevic, 2004). In this case, from a Foucauldian (1994) perspective, the real works as an ideological tool and sexual content becomes what Williams (1999) defines – referring to pornography – as a particular form of confessional technology.

As Martinez Dy and Jayawarna (2020) note, based on decolonial theory, our bodily existence is suffused with the narratives we use to inscribe ourselves in reality. In this way, no labour happens outside of certain contexts of inequality, just as the discourse around entrepreneurship connected to the gig economy mobilises a narrative of freedom and self-empowerment to results that are anything but generalised.

Hackett (2020) notes the impact of the Covid-19 lockdown in the field of platformed and gig-ified sex work. Such pressures, both situational, personal, and systemic, have to be framed and understood in the context of gig/informal work. This means looking at how such digital labour contexts both present themselves as a salvation against recent events and loss of income from other types of employment, but also overly burden workers. They are intimated to be, and do, all the things – to become the brand themselves, rather than a producer of materials to sell.

Elias et al. (2017) call this "aesthetic labour". This term seeks to capture what happens at the juncture of neoliberalism, postfeminism, and subjectivity – how different subject positions are constituted by, and in tension with, neoliberal changes in social economic organisation and a postfeminist approach to power and autonomy. It makes evident how surveillance (of self and others) is a prime form of organising power dynamics in labour, that the concept of labour itself has been multiplied and spread over virtually all areas of life, and that "technologies of sexiness" (Evans et al., 2010) are at the forefront of how bodies – especially bodies read as "women" – are products of a system of assemblage through which they accrue value.

In this sense, "glamour labour" (Elias et al., 2017; Wissinger, 2015) brings together the production of bodies, the psychosocial and affective experiences that are normatively mandated to accompany such bodies, and the absolute pervasiveness of the potential of performing that labour at any given moment of one's life, in articulation with a host of different potential subjectivities that accompany those bodies.

This is to say, there is not just one single dimension of being online that produces a construction of identity, subjectivity, and framing bodies, but all platforms bring with them the tools – and thus the constraints – of building different bodies and subjectivities

in a process of constant assemblage which denies any chance of an univocal body to be conceptualised or formed.

Methodology

Our empirical source is a series of semi-structured interviews conducted by an under-graduate student, with Italian OnlyFans sexual(ised) content producers, between December 2020 and February 2021.

We contacted potential interview participants through a snowball method. As we address in the "Limitations" section, this means that our research does not seek to be representative of all (Italian) OnlyFans producers. However, by deploying a constructivist approach – informed by previously noted Foucauldian frameworks around technologies of the self – we advance knowledge about how working with and on the body is a multi-layered phenomenon.

Twenty different participants agreed to be interviewed, all self-identifying as cisgender women, and all of them white, Italian women between 19 and 29 years old. The interviews were conducted in Italian via online communication platforms, given the impact of Covid-19 in terms of health and safety concerns, and in terms of limitations to travelling. The interviews were pseudonymised, transcribed verbatim by the student, and then translated into English by one of the authors, and double-checked by the other. Participants were mindful of the time they invested in the interview, and for ethical reasons, we sought to keep those interviews as short as possible, which resulted in very short interviews, with each transcript at around 4–6 pages.

We followed the procedures laid out by Braun and Clarke (2006) in order to perform Thematic Analysis. The interview scripts were read over several times to ascertain main topics and salient concepts. The main codes were identified and then organised into topics and sub-topics (when appropriate). The coding was discussed amongst all authors, and any outstanding doubts were discussed until there was consensus about the coding.

Results

Our deployment of Thematic Analysis has resulted in three main themes, with several sub-themes and codes. These results can be seen in Table 1. The responses that our participants gave can be understood as treating the body as something Corporeal, with concrete, physical changes that can be enacted on it, both through *Outwards presentation* and *Bodywork*; in a Technical sense, since it can be photographed or filmed in certain angles, in certain positions, and can be digitally altered by altering the resulting *Visual* products, and since it is also deployed within the context of a *Narrative* that co-determines what participants do to/with the body; but also as a site for Self-transformational processes, both in terms of *Self-acceptance* of a changed or unchanged body, as a

counterpoint to other's *Diversity*, and as a tool within a more diverse *Marketing strategy* system.

While overall we did not identify clusters of differing response patterns in most aspects of our data, we noted how there seemed to be a difference between responses provided by content producers who saw themselves as engaging in OnlyFans on a professional capacity, and those who considered themselves amateurs. For the former, concerns about marketing strategies and valuation of content seem to be at the forefront of their overall approach and framing of their responses. For the latter, there is a greater emphasis on a more organic approach to content production, but also an ambivalence when the role of communities and access to friends or partners is mobilised in order to garner more views and subscribers, or a more methodical approach to content creation. Since this article focuses on the topic of bodies, we note these findings below in relation to that specific topic, rather than treating them separately.

Discussion

Working on the body

There are two main ways in which our participants noted any form of interaction with their bodies in connection to doing OnlyFans-related content: by changing their presentation via applying makeup, having specific hairdo routines, or using specific outfits; and by changing the physical properties of their bodies via exercise or the thought-out deployment of specific dietary routines. We can easily connect this behaviour to the managing of digital self and self-branding (Banet-Weiser & Arzumanova, 2013; Marwick, 2013; Senft, 2013; Whitmer, 2019).

It is possible to see, especially when it comes to makeup and hair, the way that these OnlyFans content producers rely on their previous employment experiences and how the work they do is supported or facilitated by a range of different experiences – both professional and personal. As Mafalda (26) says:

> As I worked as a beautician, I am pretty good at doing everything myself.

Other participants have focused on makeup alone, explicitly disavowing any particular concerns about appearance. One such example is Giacoma (26), who said:

> I hardly care about my physical appearance at all; if I have to do a photo shoot I put on makeup, but nothing else.

The ambivalent role of makeup in how it changes how the body is perceived and presented is further complicated by different typologies of makeup:

> I take care of makeup and hair alone, even if I prefer a more *natural* makeup, not too elaborate [emphasis added]. (Rebecca, 21)

Main themes	Sub-themes	Codes	Description	Verbatim examples
Corporeal	*Outwards presentation*	Makeup	The use or non-use of makeup	*I don't need to wear makeup*
		Hair	The use or non-use of hair treatments, products, wigs, combing styles	*I cut my hair myself, the color has been the same for a year*
		Outfits	The choice for specific items of clothing	*Sometimes I use weird outfits to vary*
	Bodywork	Physical exercise	Resorting to working out to change or shape the body	*During COVID I continued to exercise at home*
		Dietary regimes	To have or not have specific concerns about what and how to eat	*I eat what I want, I don't diet*
Technical	*Visual/ imagetic*	Framing	The use of image framing and composition to present the body	*I move in a sensual way, framing both the face and body*
		Posing	Adopting a certain body position or expression for the purpose of creating images/videos	*On OnlyFans I focus more on poses and looks*
		Editing and post-production	The editing (usually digital) of visual and audiovisual objects after their production	*Everyime a photographer shows me the photos, I see myself differently*
	Narrative	Glamourised	A highly aestheticised self-presentation, usually in connection to a sexual trope	*I am the classic model for glamor shooting and artistic nudes*
		Everyday life	Presenting a semblance of everyday-life scenarios	*They want to see a normal girl, in her normal life*
		Essentialised embodiment	The body as a biological inheritance that shapes itself	*I'm lucky to be born with this body*
Self-trans-formational	*Self-acceptance and celebration*	Freedom in the body as-is	The body seen as unchanged and celebrated as such	*I have always been completely comfortable with my body and sexuality*
		The body as changed	Bodily transformations becoming something positive	*I changed shape in a short time [...] and I thought about taking a picture of myself to accept my change*
	Diversity awareness		Awareness of different types of bodies on OnlyFans as a framework	*There are so many other different models and endless ways to represent myself*
	Marketing strategy		Body presentation and modification informed by marketing strategies	*I ask what subscribers like and don't like, to get immediate feedback*

Table 1. List of the themes, sub-themes, and codes (with verbatim examples) from the thematic analysis

The idea of "natural makeup" invests a technical gesture with the idea of an unmediated reality, seen as purer, recalling the idea of authenticity. This directly connects to how Banet-Weiser (2012) and Bernstein (2007) refer to authenticity as something that is not only projected outwardly but also felt as real by content producers. Rather than signaling a disinvestment on these platforms or sex work, "natural makeup" as an oxymoron conveys the role that "natural" has in accruing value for some of the participants.

Interestingly, for some of the other participants, hair is more important. But while some talk about "fixing" their hair as minor maintenance, others take more impacting and lasting measures:

> I change my hair colour and see how the people who follow me prefer. (Loreta, 19)

Other participants did not differentiate at all between the importance of makeup and hair, and in fact added other normative staples of what is socially considered to be a more feminine:

> As for aesthetics, it is very important for me to wear make-up, always be shaved and have my hair in order. (Rebecca, 22)

Physical exercise was less frequently mentioned, but it still showed up in the testimonies of several participants. This included both descriptions of pastime interests that were maintained or repurposed for the sake of OnlyFans work – such as practicing pole dancing, or in the case of Rebecca (22), practicing yoga – and more focused physical routines. These sometimes intersect with specific diets – one such example is Fabia (23):

> I have been going to the gym for three years, and for the past year I have been accompanied by a personal trainer, both in terms of nutrition and [physical] training.

Participants also mentioned how their physical activities were not necessarily connected to OnlyFans:

> As for the gym, I work out first of all for myself, because I like to keep fit. (Selvaggia, 23)

As feminist theory has demonstrated, the idea of choice and personal presentation is often fraught with tension in how it intersects with media culture – agency is simultaneously bolstered and disciplined in what Evans et al. (2010) call the "technologies of sexiness". As a counterpoint to this, some participants (especially the ones who did not consider themselves sex workers, because they were not fully committed to OnlyFans, or because they had other main sources of income) made a point of noting what they did *not* do:

> I eat what I want, I don't diet and I don't train […] if it were a job, it would be appropriate for me to train, but since it isn't, I feel no obligation. (Susanna, 23)

> I don't need to wear makeup, to pretend to be another person. (Eleonora, 22)

These interviewees seem to refuse the idea that they have to work on their self-presentation and self-branding explicitly, in favour of a more natural use of the platform. Not without irony, this means that they are still working on their self-presentation, while being able to rhetorically distance themselves from the idea of a fabricated presentation, and thus feeling even more able to claim that they are "authentic", as many interviewees stated. Several respondents used "I am lucky" (Rosalinda, 20; Gaetana, 29) to note their physical fitness in connection with their *lack* of working out, thus still equating a slim, fit, body with surplus value. As we explore further below, this notion of "luck" fits into a series of micro-narratives that help create "bodies", as such.

Media work as body work

Although forms of working on or through the body that create some visible change are one of the most evident ways to inquire about bodies, the process of creating media objects requires, in itself, that bodies are positioned and framed in certain ways, and their shape or visual effects and presence considered in some way. Below, we show how participants work with and through media, framing their bodies in certain ways, editing images and videos, and thus work on bodily assemblages – that is to say, the technical choices and operations that constitute part of their work involve deploying the body itself as a technical instrument. As we posit, this is one of the ways through which bodily assemblages are constituted; rather than the body, a series of bodies are produced, worked on and worked through, impacting on the way those bodies are perceived both by consumers and by the producer as well.

This often involves preparation and is, again, reminiscent of a vision of the body that is clearly orthopaedic (Foucault, 2013):

> Before a photoshoot I study what expressions I am going to do, I put myself in front of a mirror and try some poses in order to be ready. (Selvaggia, 23)

Again, we can find here an acute awareness of the fact that content produced here is mostly geared towards consumption and is aimed at selling subscriptions and content. Not all participants sell the same content or agree on what content sells best, but regardless of that, several note how positions are often studied or prepared:

> Among the poses, obviously the one from behind wins, in general the more "dirty" the better. (Selvaggia, 23)

The same can be said of framing:

> To shoot this part [where I masturbate] I frame myself from above using a contraption that is normally used to hold tablets from a bedframe. (Camilla, 28)

> In my videos, I move in a sensual way, framing both the face and the body. (Loreta, 19)

As is clear from these excerpts, it's not just cameras or phones which are deployed as systems of media work – the body is also positioned, not unlike a tablet holder is positioned, and becomes another technological means to be considered, adapted, and changed according to the needs – be it of the person, or of the pressures of marketing, echoing Marwick (2013).

Another aspect of this has to do with editing: especially with video content, this is seen as a major step of the whole process. Editing means, overall, choosing what to include and not include in a given set of photos, or which takes to include in a given video, how to separate videos into sellable clips, and so on:

> I always create well-designed amateur videos: I prepare the lights, the scenography […] and it depends also from the feedback from my subscribers. (Rita, 21)

Thus, it requires that the subject looks upon itself, that it evaluates itself in accordance to what is deemed productive, attractive, or marketable. This does not mean adhering to a predetermined notion of framing or editing, but rather to produce and rhetorically validate certain contexts where content is given sense, coherence, usefulness, and, ultimately, subjective meaning – by narrating the body's presence. The subject is under the obligation to watch itself, to constantly give an account of oneself – as a person who is attempting to perform authenticity, or as the personae they theatrically perform (Foucault, 2013; Goffman, 2004).

Making sense of embodied representations through micro-narratives

The type of body work performed by OnlyFans content producers sometimes also elicited responses that dealt precisely with the *type* of content produced:

> For the jobs I do (on OnlyFans and as a model) it is very important to have a well-groomed body [since] I am the typical model for glamour shooting and artistic nudes. (Fabia, 23)

This shows that the way bodies are shaped, treated, and groomed is seen by several of the participants as relating to a set of expectations – internalised or not – about what the physical characteristics of a model should be.

This is also visible when considering that several of the participants take on personae in order to roleplay a fantasy. This usually revolves around a glamourised approach to certain fetishes – there is a heavy investment in creating the representation of a "purely" fetishistic image. These images attempt to condense as much as possible all the elements, and only the elements, that relate to that specific fetish or kink:

> Fans of "Japanese dolls / girls" really liked a set where I had my hair pulled up in two pigtails […and there are] photos in which I become a Mistress: in one set I was wearing a full leather harness and red lipstick. (Eleonora, 22)

This involves a consciously planned approach to a very self-aware notion of what it is to post something on OnlyFans:

> Everything I create is fake, made on purpose so that people are tempted to ask me for something more (and to pay me). (Fabia, 23)

Sometimes, the narrative operates in the opposite direction, by evidencing the produced aspect of what is seemingly without mediation, a glimpse of everyday life. It is this stylistic strategy that, according to Saunders (2019), promises direct access to the real as a system of value accrual:

> In the photos I publish, I often wear intimate outfits for which I literally have an obsession. (Rebecca, 21)

But if this somehow might seemingly point towards totally candid content, she disavows that same interpretation by adding:

> Before shooting, I study the photo I want to create thoroughly, setting the appropriate lights and creating a script. (Rebecca, 21).

The script becomes the basis for the expression of a "true" self, rather than the denial of it, and "true" characteristics about the content producer are deployed as strategically as those who are created with the purpose to enact a specific fantasy.

Another approach to the (apparent) lack of bodily preparations or changes (in terms of deciding whether to diet, exercise, have a hairdo, or wear makeup) pertains to how some of the participants have addressed their own bodies as being the "right" or "appropriate" type of body for the content that they produce. In this context, the lack of intervention – or choosing to do one thing (e.g., makeup) but not another (e.g., exercise) – is connected to a narrative about normal bodies and luck, physiology, or genetics:

> I don't do any sports, I'm lucky to be born with this body. (Rosalinda, 20)

> I am very lucky because I have a pretty fast metabolism. (Gaetana, 29).

This carries with it a naturalistic or essentialist approach to embodiment, where intervention on the body or refashioning of different embodiments is only necessary when one is "unlucky".

Scopic technologies as a form of working the embodied self

As it can be inferred from some of the previous quotes, some participants see the way they change as a constant process of transformation or reinvention, but only at a super-

ficial, performative level. Others connect their OnlyFans work with more meaningful processes of self-work, both from a more intrapersonal perspective, and from a systemic approach to how bodies are represented and made to signify.

From our analysis, we have noted that issues around body acceptance and body positivity for oneself coexist with more abstract discourses about body diversity overall (in regard to OnlyFans content), and with how marketing decisions inform the way their own bodies are presented. However, it is also worth noting that essentialist discourses around marketing itself were also present in some of our interviews:

> I've always been interested in marketing, and I think I have almost a natural gift to advertise myself on social media. (Mafalda, 24)

This can be read in two different ways. On the one hand, the labour – cognitive and physical – put into learning how to work with social media marketing is being devalued by not being presented as the highly technical skill that it is; on the other hand, the idea of the "gifted person" is reminiscent of how talent is deployed as a marker of true value amongst content producers, and further helps to conflate content production with content dissemination (Abbing, 2002).

In terms of marketing, the two main tendencies we have identified are the way the producers see themselves as the creators of varied content, and how changing their appearance in some way helps to create or convey that variety, even when more technical aspects stay the same. Camilla (28), who as we saw above talked about how she used a tablet holder to frame her videos, then noted how this created some similarity in the content produced, which would be made to look more diverse by the way the body was deployed.

> In general, this is the structure of all the videos, varying in aesthetics by changing makeup and hair. (Camilla, 28)

Others note that their pre-existing body modifications are themselves a form of creating marketing differentiation:

> My peculiarity is certainly represented by my body modifications [...] I have six silicone implants on the labia majora and two dilators on the labia minora [and] I also post simple photos of my piercings and tattoos. (Azzurra, 19)

This can also sometimes stand, in the eyes of our research participants, at odds with becoming more visible on the platform:

> I have a particular look, extremely alternative at first sight, and I think this detracts from growing my OnlyFans member base. (Gaetana, 29)

Participants interiorise self-branding dynamics, entering a competitive market in the process of ongoing self-surveillance and maintaining a dual gaze (Marwick, 2013) where

creators are in competition. Other content producers we interviewed take a different approach to the decision-making process, focusing on direct feedback from potential customers and followers and thus deploying something more akin to a logic of supply and demand and drawing on sales techniques, such as customer surveys.

> Out of 61 subscribers I have, 40 have told me they want to see a normal girl, in her normal life, [so] I don't wear makeup even when I have to make videos, I show myself like this, "worn out". (Eleonora, 22)

This is the same participant who also dressed up as a Mistress, or a "Japanese doll", demonstrating how narratives about being authentic in one's self-presentation can coexist alongside different forms of representation, and how catering to different tastes and clienteles can be seen as an organising nexus of those different modes of producing content.

Body diversity is also mentioned by some of our participants as being a characteristic of the platform itself, and how that body diversity is important because of the challenge to a hegemonic single model of what beauty is. However, it is interesting to note that this is, at times, presented as a seemingly defensive argument by OnlyFans content producers, who see themselves as potentially replicating the already existing paradigm. The potential defensiveness creates a systematic erasure via disavowal: often participants note that body normativity is a problem, but not a problem *here*.

By placing all body types under the umbrella of diversity, participants seem to eschew actual considerations about the power differentials which inscribe those bodies with attention, value – and thus the capacity to earn money, and even a living income – and desirability:

> I see a lot of girls who "make a bang" on these platforms despite not representing the canonical type of beauty; it is a platform that allows you to be followed for who you are. (Sibilla, 26)

Another way the same objective is reached is when parasocial (Hair, 2021) relations and content that foster them are deployed side by side with more consciously planned out materials:

> In my Onlyfans profile I am really myself, perhaps even more than on other social networks: I make jokes, I make fun of myself, I also post photos where I look bad and I write "guys, this is me in real life". (Rita, 21)

Here, the idea of authenticity (Berg, 2017; Laurin, 2019) is what validates an action where the subject is "looking bad" – which redeploys a hierarchy of bodies, but then provides a rationale for the potential transgression of showing a less-than-desirable body. This idea of the authentic is far from shared by all participants. And when it comes to bodies and body diversity, another form of erasing the problem is connecting it to the potential for

profits that derives from emotional labour and parasocial relations, while eliding bodies themselves:

> I think that the physical aspect on these platforms matters very little: the character you create and how much the clients become attached to you is much more important. (Elda, 25)

A deeper sense of transformation – since it pertains to a transformation of the self by the self, or of how the self is construed in processes where subjects open themselves up for change – is also seen when participants talk about the relationship they have with their own bodies. This either takes the expression of a change that their bodies went through and how those changes had an impact in how they saw themselves through the photos; or how the photos and videos they produced were deployed as a technological system that allowed them to alter the gaze they deployed on themselves. These narratives often show how body image and issues around self-esteem are at the intersection between physical and mental health:

> I have a background of eating disorders, so I've always had trouble exposing myself […]. When I started doing nude photography, it was a liberation; as much as I feel insecure look- ing in the mirror, the finished product rarely makes me sick; […] I see myself more beautiful than I do in reality and [it] has been my lifesaver in terms of physical and mental health. (Camilla, 28)

There are two main aspects to note about these testimonies, and a sentiment that is shared among several respondents. On the one hand, we see how scopic technologies allow for the creation of a *product* that is dissimilar to other forms of self-looking, which are seemingly less mediated, such as the mirror; this product is different inasmuch as it does not simply portray what is "there" (i.e., what is equivalent to the mirror), but allows for further transformations to be operated on the representation.

On the other hand, there seems to be an acknowledgement, even if tacit, that, though there seem to be positive effects when it comes to feelings of empowerment, body self-image, and mental health, these do not erase the issues that are associated with more "authentic" modes of self-perception, as denoted in the use of the phrases, "as if there are no problems" and "than I do in reality". The focus, however, still remains on the subjective self:

> I have a serene relationship with my body [… and] the important thing is that I am able to please myself, since I will be the only person who will keep me company for life. (Mafalda, 24)

The way different participants engage in relationships between their bodies and media points to an ambivalence to how scopic technologies are deployed. They seem to dis- tance these participants from their more immediate perceptions of their own bodies,

which is seen by them as a "lifesaver"; but they also reinforce the necessity for technological systems of mediation as a coping mechanism that does not address the underlying issues centred around their perceptions of their own bodies.

However, it is important to note that several respondents also considered engaging in content production as something that profoundly altered their relationship with themselves:

> I have learned to accept myself as I am, to accept my sexual preferences and tastes, and to really show myself for who I am; I don't need to wear makeup, to pretend to be another person. (Eleonora, 22)

For respondents who echoed these words, their labour allowed them to manifest what they feel to be their "true" selves, not just towards others, but to themselves – they deployed those same technologies to become *closer* to what their sense of reality is. In fact, several respondents associated being clothed with discomfort, and being naked with comfort – not just psychologically, but often also physically, in the sense that they felt their movements less restrained, and felt that there were fewer scripts about which they were self-conscious.

In all of these cases and different approaches to the role that scopic technologies play, the subject is still deployed as being in a state of lacking, and the representations operate orthopedically, pedagogically, and representatively: they are a way to articulate power–knowledge relationships between the subject and themselves, and transforming how different meanings and layers of "body" are lived and conceived of in our participants' narratives. An implication of this, which we now explore, is the role of individualised subjectivity in the production of these digitised bodies.

Conclusions:
OnlyFans as a framework for producing digitised embodied bodies

There was one rhetorical line uniting the vast majority of the contributions put forward by our participants: namely, a focus on the self as a producer, as an entrepreneur, as a transformer of the self, and of the self's body. This rhetorical nexus of significance has a possible double reading.

On the one hand, it encapsulates the ways in which the subject opens itself as a work in progress, not out of an aesthetic concern with a "good life", but with a productive concern with a "proper life" (Foucault, 2000b, 2000b; Rose, 1998), in line with neoliberal discourse. As Elias et al. (2017, p. 38) note, "glamour labour is never done[;] it is always unfinished and in a state of becoming".

On the other hand, it is also in line with the impact of platformed work, and the co-incidental gig economy, in how subjects organise their day-to-day lives, and how the line between work, leisure, the private sphere of intimacy, and its public sphere manifes-

tations, become blurred. A critical stance on postfeminism (Elias et al., 2017; Gill, 2007, 2011) can here be used to show how this creates a neverending cycle of demands on the bodies, affects, and subjectivities of contemporary lives, especially to those who are read as women. An internalised affective experience of being "in power" (i.e., empowered) becomes not the result of a series of sociocultural positionings which grant access to a wider array of potential ways of being and doing things in the world, but a mandate. Our participants *must* present themselves as empowered, and *must* act in an empowered way, wherein what counts as being "empowered" is defined from the outside.

Through OnlyFans, the body becomes platformed, adapted to its requirements and pressures. This platformed opening up of the subject as an object to itself is here framed as one that focuses on bodies, but it is also clear that there is an underlying current of what Nikolas Rose (1998) dubbed "psy discourse". The relationship that the participants have with their bodies is both mediated through the gazes that technologies allow (and impose), and equally through a deployment of categories of psycho-medical and psychosocial (Elias et al., 2017) discourses around how one feels and interacts with the body. These discourses create a space of potential action and autonomy, but also often foreclose the macrosocial critique of how bodies are disciplined by subjects themselves (Evans et al., 2010). Under this perspective, personal happiness and self-satisfaction become an objective unto itself, and given the blurred boundaries between work and pleasure, there is a slippery connection between being a productive subject and being a self-satisfied, happy subject – as Ahmed (2010) notes, happiness has long been deployed as a mollification strategy for the disciplining of contemporary subjectivities.

This does not disavow the fact that participants had, overall, very positive experiences with their engagement with OnlyFans. Most participants see it as something that has given them a new outlook on their body, and which has helped to maintain their health and improve their approach to life. In fact, it is precisely at the intersection of this ambivalence that the problematisation of neoliberalism as a continuation of the process of individuation and individualisation (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) lies: the unmistakable positive returns it brings for peoples' lives, and their enmeshment with logics of production, efficiency, capitalism, and self-instrumentalisation; and the negative toll they take and the disciplinary possibilities they facilitate.

In fact, and as our title hints at, we argue that it is not *a* body (per person) that is shaped or represented, but rather, each subject is made to develop, and operate on, a multiplicity of bodies, understood as more or less connected, but still able to be framed – technically or emotionally – as differentiated. These different bodies are construed along timelines (the bodies they had before and that they have now); platforms (what can or should be shown in a given platform, or how marketable certain traits can be made to be); technologically differently mediated contexts (the body in the mirror and the body in a post-processed photo or video); and direct or indirect body interventions (the "unkempt" natural body, the body with makeup and a hairdo, the body which expresses

a certain fetish). These are, in a physical sense, the same bodies – but it is also clear how participants engage with realism, authenticity, and the production of fictional narratives, personae, scenarios, and outfits that re-inscribe the pressures and necessities of monetising their time and bodies.

Underlying these processes, however, there is also a deeply somatic process of negative effects and exhaustion. The maintenance, disciplining, orthopaedic taming, and constant representation – multiplied by different platforms, with their specific requirements and interactions – generates an often-invisible amount of work. The (digitised) body explodes into different platforms, configurations, maintenance, and representations scenarios which, in turn, deplete time and energy for our participants, and seemingly naturalise or normalise the need for multiple jobs, and an ever-increasing amount of time and energy dedicated to cultivating a productive subjectivity. While this does not resolve the issue around "constrained optimism" (Maddison, 2013) that sits at the tension between individual agency and systemic, material inequalities, it helps to understand how this tension impacts not only subjects' perceptions and actions, but also the fluidity of how seemingly material elements – such as the body – are construed and contested in that tension.

Limitations and further studies

As noted in the "Methodology" section, our work encompasses only a small convenience sample of OnlyFans Italian producers, and interviewing times were rather short. This means that we do not attempt or claim to represent the general population of (Italian) women who are OnlyFans content producers. Furthermore, while our specific targeting of emerging adults has allowed us to look closely at a given cohort for our study, it also means that, on average, our sample has more formal education and (potential) technological familiarity and literacy than the general Italian population. This means that our respondents, overall, sat at the intersection of several modes of privilege (be it social, economic, racial, and/or cultural) that must be considered when interpreting these results.

Overall, then, we consider that more studies are needed to account for different intersections of privilege and discrimination – taking into account race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and body configurations – and how their situatedness informs the way they are (un)able to resort to different platforms. We also consider it to be fundamental to understand how issues around technical accessibility might make these platforms (in) hospitable to different bodies and subjects.

Notes

1   Just to provide some examples, many important newspapers such as Il Corriere della Sera in Italy (Redazione Economia, 2021); Le Figaro in France (Legardnier, 2021); Der Spiegel in Germany (Böhm, 2020); El Pais in Spain (Zerega, 2020); and The New York Times in the US (Friedman, 2021) dedicated several articles to OnlyFans in 2020 and in 2021.

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