

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Between feminist self-empowerment and selling out emotional intimacy: A qualitative content analysis of German reporting on OnlyFans from 2020 till 2023

Zwischen feministischer Selbstermächtigung und Ausverkauf emotionaler Intimität: Eine qualitative Inhaltsanalyse der deutschen Berichterstattung über OnlyFans von 2020 bis 2023

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1. Introduction

On OnlyFans, around 1.5 million providers create content at self-selected intervals, which is usually (but not always) erotic in nature (Hamilton et al., 2022, p. 2). The visibility of this content, usually images, videos, or messages, must be activated through paid subscriptions. Hamilton et al. (2022, p. 1) emphasize the special nature of the OnlyFans activity: “OnlyFans creators are uniquely positioned at the intersection of professional social media content creation and sex work”. OnlyFans differs from other platforms for sexual content due to its structures, which are similar to the affordances of social networking sites (SNS) (DeVito et al., 2017). However, it also clearly differentiates itself from SNSs as it focuses on building a monetized parasocial relationship (Kuss & Griffiths, 2011).

However, the question of how German media report on a platform that offers sexualized content and emotional intimacy in the guise of a social networking site deals with a perspective on the topic that goes beyond sexuality. Understanding the media discourse on a platform like OnlyFans is also relevant for understanding the specific phenomena of profound mediatization (Hepp, 2021), such as platformization and digital work contexts. Since pornographic content falls into an area of the everyday world that is more private, the analysis provides insight into the social acceptance of the progressive integration of social network sites into different areas of life.

The study focuses on how the OnlyFans phenomenon is portrayed and assessed by the reporting media. This is done by means of a qualitative content analysis, according to Kuckartz (2010, 2016), in which online media are also considered alongside traditional media.

2. State of research

The presentation of the current state of research addresses four aspects: 1) the terminology used by providers of digital sexual content, 2) characteristics of OnlyFans as a digital platform, 3) parasocial relationships on digital platforms and 4) media representation of sex work.

Communication science research on reporting on sex work content can be described as fragmentary. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, essays tend to be dedicated to the pros and cons of sex work (Grenz, 2018). To date, there have been no comprehensive national or international studies on the question of how digital sex work or the commercialization of pornographic content is portrayed in reporting. In a quantitative content analysis of reporting on prostitution, Höly (2014, pp. 89–91) was able to identify four frames on the topic of prostitution: prostitution as normal employment, as a violation of human rights, as a moral issue and the role of the state as a regulator. The first two frames in particular reveal polarized

reporting in which both extremes of opinion on prostitution are represented. Internationally, a US study shows that reporting characterizes sex workers as victims and uses distorted statistics and emotionalized narratives on the topic of prostitution (Jackson, 2016). However, there is no discussion of possible changes in reporting in the form of temporary phases, as Cohen (1972), for example, describes with the phenomenon of moral panic. There is also no differentiation between reporting media to address the extent to which certain forms of representation can be linked to the political and editorial orientation of reporting media.

3. Research questions

The OnlyFans platform is a phenomenon of deeper mediatization, which results in a substantive proximity to the concept of platformed work and the term content creator. As shown, there are isolated studies that deal with the motives of providers or reporting on prostitution. However, there is a lack of in-depth scientific analyses of the media portrayal of the platform and its providers. Against this background, the following research questions were formulated:

RQ1: How are the OnlyFans platform and its providers characterized in the reporting?

RQ2: To what extent can thematic phases be identified within the reporting?

RQ3: What are the differences and similarities between the reporting media?

4. Method

This study used a purposive sample (Möhring et al., 2005, p. 158) of articles from national quality, tabloid, and online media. The inclusion of reporting media with high circulation and reach and varying periodicity served to identify phases and key events. Online-only media aimed at a young audience, so-called “millennial media”, were also analyzed (Bødker, 2017, p. 28). It would also have been possible to include regional media, but the coverage here proved to be too low. The circulation figures were recorded using data from the Informationsgemeinschaft für Verbreitung von Werbeträgern (IVW). The editorial line was taken from editorial statutes and previous studies. To determine the sample, a full survey was conducted using the publication databases WISO-net and Nexis Uni and the specific online archives of *SZ*, *FAZ*, *VICE*, and *Buzzfeed* on OnlyFans. These databases included both print articles and articles that only appeared in online sections. This was done for the research period from 1st January 2020 to 1st June 2023, and *OnlyFans* was used as the keyword.

For the analysis of 65 articles, a content-structuring qualitative approach was chosen with the aim of creating a typology (Kuckartz, 2016, p. 45 ff.). The focus here is on a grouping process of “similarities in selected characteristics” (Kuckartz, 2010, p. 555), from which a typology is derived as the “totality of the types that apply to a specific phenomenon area” (Kuckartz, 2010, p. 556). For this purpose,

the basic dimensions of the codebook were first derived from the research questions: “Communicators”, “platform”, “media discourse” as well as “formal characteristics”. So-called main categories (HK) were derived from the material and assigned to the respective dimensions.

5. Results

The moral dimensions of sex work are not at the center of the media discourse. The term prostitution does not appear in the reporting, neither in the description of the providers nor in connection with the platform. Rather, the extent and legitimacy of the monetization of parasocial relationships and emotional intimacy are discussed in the media and thus also implicitly the consequences of deeper media-tization. This shows that the focus of reporting is not on the social acceptance of pornographic content.

5.1 Results for RQ1: Characterization of the OnlyFans platform and its providers in the reporting

Various media characterizations of the OnlyFans platform and the providers can be identified in the reporting.

The term *creator* characterizes providers from the perspective of platform communicators as a ‘new’ form of influencer or content creator. This representation focuses on digital practices, such as activity on a digital platform and the creation of content on it. The term stands for a phase of reporting in which she uses terms associated with SNSs and takes a more neutral stance regarding the content created. When describing the creator’s audience, the reporting either uses factual terms, such as user or subscriber, or terms that suggest a more emotional relationship, such as fan or follower. There is no direct indication that the activity involves the creation of sexual content or monetized interaction with the audience. The term, therefore, stands for a certain normalization of providers on OnlyFans, as they are brought close to the commercially established term of content creator.

The characterization as a *businesswoman* stands for reporting that accentuates the capitalist intentions of providers on OnlyFans. Providers are primarily described here as profit-oriented sex workers who not only upload content but also make a “crass career” (*BILD*, 26th April 2022). The businesswoman’s audience also emphasizes the aspect of the business relationship instead of the emotional connection by talking about customers or subscribers. Consequently, the businesswoman sees content creation primarily as a means of financing her own livelihood.

The characterization *feminist* focuses on the motif of sexual liberation: on the one hand, for professional sex workers by giving them the opportunity to decide on their content creation without intermediaries. On the other hand, for individuals, who were previously not active in sex work but as ‘normal’ content creators or influencers, as they can now utilize the attention of the male audience for themselves.

The term “money printing press” is used to characterize the platform’s intention to obtain the greatest possible profit from both users and providers as efficiently

as possible. The platform is in the role of a service company that is primarily geared towards maximizing profits. In doing so, it also resorts to questionable measures such as the unannounced deletion of profiles and the freezing of credit balances (FAZ, 21st February 2021). The relationship with providers is ambivalent, as although they earn enormous amounts of money through the platform, they are also highly dependent on the platform and its regulations (SZ, 4th November 2021).

In connection with the creator, OnlyFans is characterized in the media as a creative platform that offers artists and other creative people the opportunity to publish content, in line with the narrative of the platform operator. The inclusivity and diversity of the platform are emphasized, which, unlike pornographic websites, does not sort people into categories.

In the context of the feminist, the platform is presented as a place that enables feminist independence through its infrastructure (characterization as a tool for self-empowerment).

5.2 Results for RQ2: Thematic phases of reporting

In the reporting on OnlyFans, four successive thematic phases could be differentiated. In the first reporting phase, the *introduction*, the platform is presented as a new trend whose functionality and origin must first be explained to the readers. The focus of the reporting is therefore on dealing with the questions of what kind of platform it is, what content is in the foreground, and who uses it. What is striking in this phase of reporting is that OnlyFans is primarily described as a new “social media platform” (BILD, 27th October 2020). The second phase in the reporting, which begins in the following year 2021, is a *negotiation of content*. A key event within this phase is the ban on pornographic content announced by the operators in the summer of 2021 (and withdrawn shortly afterward), which is the subject of intensive reporting. It can be seen here that OnlyFans is primarily referred to as an erotic or porn platform at this time. The focus is on the impact of their function and content on society and the extent to which the use of OnlyFans is socially acceptable. Female providers themselves are now increasingly having their say, giving rise to various interpretations of OnlyFans’ activities, for example, as a feminist act or an improvement in the work of sex workers.

Headlines such as “New internet companies and coronavirus are changing the porn industry. Young women are becoming solo entrepreneurs who sell their nudity online to paying customers” (WELT, 14th March 2021) mark a third phase known as the *capitalization panic*. In this phase, there is a very strong focus on the revenue of the providers and the platform. It is significant that OnlyFans is presented as a new means of generating high financial profits very quickly. In this phase, the legitimacy of the monetization of emotional closeness as a product and the illusion of a partnership relationship is negotiated. The use of services on OnlyFans is presented on the one hand as a trend triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic, but on the other hand also as a necessity for some people to experience emotional affection during the pandemic.

5.3 Results for RQ3: Comparison of the reporting media

Regarding the quantity and periodicity of reporting, it is noticeable in the full survey that the conservatively orientated leading media *FAZ* and *WELT* and the tabloid newspaper *BILD* report particularly frequently on OnlyFans and their communicators. As a rule, articles stand alone and make no reference to each other within the medium or across the board (except for more general formulations that refer to the thematic trend itself). Politically left-leaning media such as *taz* or *VICE* report much less frequently on the platform than other media in the sample. This is particularly surprising in the case of online media such as *VICE*, as OnlyFans is characterized in the reporting as a phenomenon that is particularly popular among young people. Overall, all reporting media show that the platform is reported on particularly regularly during the Covid-19 pandemic. This supports the thesis of a moral panic, according to which a topic tends to be artificially constructed in terms of its social significance and dissemination, for example, to increase media coverage.

6. Conclusion

In everyday mediatized life, the monetization of social relationships in reporting on OnlyFans is discussed as a problematic phenomenon. However, it also points to a change in the marketing of pornography in the age of social network sites, in the course of which consumers not only choose freely available pornographic content but also paid but personalized content. The fact that this topic is once again subject to a taboo is shown by the fact that reporting media report on OnlyFans and its providers with a certain distance. The user experiences and motivations of consumers of the platform are rarely discussed, as the focus is predominantly on scandalizing the providers and their revenues. For the future, we, therefore, recommend not only an extended analysis of the reporting but also the scientific observation of the convergence of social network sites and marketing mediators of pornographic content.

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