

# Let's Talk About Sex (Work), Baby: Women College Students and Online Sex Work

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# Introduction

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- Online sex work is becoming an increasingly popular avenue for young women to raise capital.
- I propose to study the motivations of women-identified undergraduate students who engage in self-produced sex work online, in which they are both empowered and subjugated due to intersecting identities.
- This study will examine how college women turned to the online platform, OnlyFans, which evolved from a relatively niche website into a mainstream adult entertainment platform that has allowed many college women to earn an income, especially during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, by posting explicit pictures and videos of themselves on the OnlyFans platform to fund their university expenses.

# Background Literature & Theoretical Framework

## Feminist Perceptions

- **Oppression Paradigm** - Recognizes the commercialization of sex work not only as a form of gendered violence to the sex worker, but also as endorsement of patriarchal oppression (Sagar et al. 2016: 699).
- **Empowerment Paradigm** - Understands that women may “choose” sex work due to a myriad of reasons and stresses the power sex workers hold as they negotiate services, terms, and fees (Kissil and Davey 2010: 6-7).
- **“Gray Area” Paradigm** - Acknowledges that sex workers exist in a “gray area” between sexual agency, capitalistic exploitation, and gendered power relations. Views the dichotomy of “agent or victim” in which sex workers are placed as obsolete (Gabryszewska 2014).

## Motivations of Sex Workers

- **Autonomy** - Sex workers *online* “express clear agency and decision-making power” regarding pricing, acceptance of clients, and hours of work (Sanders et. al 2016: 14). Sex work has been found to give some survivors of sexual assault “a sense of control over their sexuality” (Cobbina and Oselin 2011: 319). Sexual pleasure has been a documented motivating factor for some sex workers.
- **Financial** - It has been found that sex work “could be appealing to students” as university tuition and costs of living continue to rise (Sagar et. al 2016: 700). Some women are finding the “relatively high pay of the sex industry” compelling in comparison to the “gender disparities of postindustrial economic life” (Bernstein 2007: 475).

## Marxism, Feminism, and Sex Workers

- **Gendered Labor** - Given its unique positionality, “sex work is critical to an analysis of the lived intersectionality of capitalism and patriarchy in individual and collective lives” (Beloso 2012: 50).

# Proposed Research Methodology

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- **Objective of Study:** To identify interpretative narratives employed by undergraduate women concerning their motivations for producing online sex work.
- **Sample:** 5-10 women currently enrolled in undergraduate courses, found through convenience sampling.
- **Data Collection:** Internet and online social research methods, collecting fieldnote data of online interactions and semi-structured interviews of industry participants.

# Preliminary Findings

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- Women college students financially profit from sex work.
- To achieve this end, some women act on agency.
- Other women become victims of an inherently patriarchal system.
- Still others are positioned somewhere in between on the continuum.

# Contribution

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- Will contribute to contemporary feminist literature which seeks to place sex workers on this continuum between agency and exploitation.