



Learning on OnlyFans: User Perspectives on Knowledge and Skills Acquired on the Platform

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Abstract

OnlyFans is a digital patronage platform on which over two million content creators produce sexually explicit content for more than 130 million users. Increased Internet access and innovative technologies that enhance sexuality via connections and knowledge are changing the ways people navigate their sexual lives. OnlyFans is unique due to its position between digital sex work and social media and its high degree of cultural assimilation. We explored with a mixed-method approach how OnlyFans users perceive the effects of their OnlyFans use on their sexual learning and sexual lives. A diverse sample of 425 OnlyFans users participated in our online survey. The quantitative results revealed that participants reported mostly positive influences of OnlyFans on their sexual lives, and that they learned new things in terms of sexual practices, sexual preferences, relationships, and sexual health. Participants also reported that they tried new things, including toy use, sexual identity exploration, sexual and relationship practices, and gender identity exploration. Thematic analysis for the qualitative question revealed increases in declarative/conceptual and procedural knowledge in terms of sexual improvements/expansion; improvements in relationships; self-improvement/expansion; skill acquisition; connecting with others through OnlyFans; and value-related learning outcomes. These results provide insight into the ways users engage with OnlyFans for sexual learning, exploration, and expansion at individual and partner-levels. Findings have implications for sex education and research and practice in digital spaces.

Keywords OnlyFans · Digital sex work · Sexual learning · Learning outcomes · User perspectives

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Introduction

OnlyFans is a novel online platform at the nexus of digital pornography and social media. More than two million independent online sex workers, i.e., “content creators”, self-produce and upload sexually explicit content that can be accessed and purchased by the platform’s users, who are often referred to as “followers” or “fans” (Friedman, 2021). As of 2021, OnlyFans has reached a user base of 130 million (The Associated Press, 2021), and can be viewed as a digital patronage platform (Uttarapong et al., 2022). Digital patronage is the process of providing sustained financial support to a content creator to demonstrate appreciation for their work and to receive exclusive content in exchange (Bonifacio & Wohn, 2020; Uttarapong et al., 2022; Wohn et al., 2019). While OnlyFans is now primarily known for sexually explicit content (Litam et al., 2022), the platform is marketed mainly as a non-adult social media content platform, designed to allow subscribers to access and purchase exclusive content from creators from a diverse range of industries (e.g., fitness, sports, cooking; Litam et al., 2022). During the COVID-19 pandemic, more sexually explicit material was produced and distributed online, and many adult content creators used OnlyFans as their platform of choice due to OnlyFans’ relatively relaxed terms of service for sexually explicit content. Mainstream audiences then began regarding OnlyFans as a primarily erotic content platform, and the platform had a 75% increase in user signups in March and April of 2020 (López, 2020), and revenue grew by more than 500% during the pandemic (Cooban, 2021).

With the exception of a brief period of a proposed ban of sexually explicit content in 2021 (Lawlor et al., under review), OnlyFans’ terms of service have been more relaxed than those of other digital patronage platforms like Patreon, Twitch, or YouTube (Uttarapong et al., 2022; Bonifacio & Wohn 2020). In consequence, OnlyFans has gained increased popularity for online sex work within the “gig economy” (i.e., the capital-labor relationship between workers and online platforms, which mediate supply and demand for the completion of small tasks/gigs; Gandini, 2019; Uttarapong et al., 2022). OnlyFans content creators are relatively autonomous in setting their own prices and terms of exchange (Safae, 2021), and OnlyFans users are able to subscribe to content creators and, based on a monthly fee, receive access to their pay-walled content (Uttarapong et al., 2022). Some content creators also offer pay-per-view options where users can access specific content in exchange for a one-time payment (ChiChi, 2020), and some content creators offer live streams or personal interactions with users for subscriptions or tips (Bernstein, 2019; Hall, 2018). In August 2021, OnlyFans had announced that it would ban all sexually explicit content as of October 2021 (The Associated Press, 2021) but a week later reversed that ban proposal after an outcry of content creators and users (Bernstein, 2021). The CEO of the OnlyFans platform, Ami Gan, stated that the reason for the initial ban proposal was the pressure of banks that refused to process payments associated with pornography (Barry, 2021). In October 2022, Ami Gan confirmed that adult content will continue to be allowed to be published on OnlyFans, at least for the next five years (Lunden, 2022).

Representation of OnlyFans in Popular Culture, and OnlyFans' Cultural Assimilation

OnlyFans is unique due to its position between the spaces of subscription-based social media and digital sex work, and “OnlyFans content creators traverse the intersection of professional content creation – a growing form of gig work – and sex work” (Hamilton et al., 2022, p. 2). The increased presence of OnlyFans in popular culture within the US, such as Beyoncé mentioning OnlyFans in her 2020 “Savage” Remix and the news of Bella Thorne making \$1 million on her first day as an OnlyFans content creator (Sanchez, 2022), appears to have resulted in a “cultural assimilation” of the platform (Hamilton et al., 2022). This cultural assimilation was also driven by the design of the platform, which does not allow for searching for content creators within OnlyFans and thus requires content creators to advertise on mainstream social media to increase traffic and establish a follower base (Hamilton et al., 2022). Because many OnlyFans content creators leveraged their already existing follower bases from their other mainstream social media (like Instagram or Twitch) to build their OnlyFans audience, the public visibility of OnlyFans further increased (Hamilton et al., 2022). Hamilton and colleagues (2022) propose that this cultural assimilation process has reduced the stigma of joining OnlyFans for both users and content creators, thus making the platform exceptionally accessible and accepted by a wide audience. In summary, in the context of this study, the term “cultural assimilation” describes an increased acceptance, destigmatization, and use of the OnlyFans platform within the US, due to the strong representation of the platform in popular culture and mainstream social media. So far, only one study has investigated the characteristics of OnlyFans users and found that the platform is particularly popular among married, white individuals who identify as heterosexual or bisexual/pansexual, and that the platform is more frequently used for sexual purposes by males (Litam et al., 2022). However, these first user statistics need to be interpreted with some caution because the sample was solicited from the Amazon Mechanical Turk platform (Litam et al., 2022), and participation biases on that platform may reflect demographic distributions in the sample to some extent (Goodman et al., 2013).

The Relevance of OnlyFans for Sexual Learning

The Internet is increasingly frequented as a medium for sexual learning, especially by young adults within the US (Holstrom, 2015). Individuals often start with search engines to find answers to their sexual health questions, but are often concerned with the credibility of the online resources they find (Buhi et al., 2009), and tend to view information from people as more reliable than information from organizations or informational websites (Fogel et al., 2010). When searching for sexually relevant information online, a perceived advantage is the anonymity the Internet offers, especially when individuals are concerned with stigma or embarrassment (Holstrom, 2015). In a study with LGBTQ+ youth, for example, 19% stated not wanting to get caught as the main motivation to search for information online (Magee et al., 2012). Frequently searched topics include STIs, sexual expression, sexual pleasure, sexual communication, and techniques to pleasure partners (Holstrom, 2015; Gilbert et al.,

2005; Magee et al., 2012; McCarthy et al., 2012; Suzuki & Calzo, 2004). Despite the high interest in pleasure-related topics, information about these topics is not well-covered by the websites that are frequently mentioned as the best examples for sexual health information within the US (Holstrom, 2015). Many individuals (especially younger adults) therefore search for additional sexually relevant information online (Holstrom, 2015).

Pornography is claimed to be an evolving source of sexual learning, particularly when other sources do not provide adequate or sufficient information about topics of interest (Albury, 2014; Litsou et al., 2021; Smith 2007, 2013). Litsou and colleagues (2021) investigated that claim in a mixed-methods systematic review of research on the use of pornography for sexual learning, which included ten articles that explicitly focused on how porn users perceive and describe the educational aspects of the pornography they consume. They report a variety of learning outcomes across studies. For example, some findings indicated that sexually explicit material was used for sexual development, learning particular skills, and developing ideas about how sex can feel (Arrington-Sanders et al., 2015). Other studies showed that individuals perceived online pornography as a helpful source of sexual stimulation, inspiration, information, and communication (Doornwaard et al., 2017), and some studies found that individuals use pornography to enhance relationships by viewing sexually explicit materials together with partner/s (Smith, 2013). However, studies also identified problems with learning from pornography, such as pornography's potential to create unrealistic expectations about sex and attractiveness, and the potential to encounter upsetting content (Doornwaard et al., 2017; Smith 2013). With thematic analysis, Litsou and colleagues (2021) identified five main themes across the ten articles they reviewed, i.e., "learning the mechanics of sex; learning concerning sexual identities and sexualities; inadequate information through pornography; wrong lessons from pornography; and a need for more relevant sex education".

Classification of Learning Outcomes: Types of Knowledge

The learning outcomes reported by Litsou and colleagues (2021) can be viewed as representations of different types of knowledge, as described in the literature on learning and memory (Baddeley, 1990; de Jong & Ferguson-Hessler, 1996; ten Berge & van Hezewijk, 1999; Tulving 1985). In the context of that literature, distinctions are made between declarative/conceptual knowledge and procedural knowledge, and the domain-specificity of these types of knowledge (de Jong & Ferguson-Hessler, 1996; ten Berge & van Hezewijk, 1999). Declarative/conceptual knowledge pertains to factual knowledge (knowing *what*) and procedural knowledge pertains to skills (knowing *how*). In terms of specificity, both declarative/conceptual and procedural knowledge can exist on a spectrum from general to domain-specific.

Different theoretical models propose different relationships between declarative/conceptual and procedural knowledge. Shiffrin and Schneider's Dual Processing Theory (1977), for example, relates declarative/conceptual knowledge to controlled processing (i.e., an attention-driven, serial, and conscious temporary activation of elements in long-term memory, such as the intentional recall of an important historical date) and procedural knowledge to automatic processing (i.e., an automatic

activation of learned sequences of elements in long-term memory that does not necessarily require attention, such as the process of riding a bike). This theoretical framework assumes that declarative/conceptual knowledge is acquired prior to procedural knowledge, which means that new information is first learned conceptually and later transformed into applicable skills via practice. Other theoretical frameworks, such as emergentist perspectives (e.g., Ellis' perspective on second language acquisition; Ellis 2003), propose that the acquisition of procedural knowledge precedes that of declarative/conceptual knowledge. In the context of the present study, the relevant theoretical distinction pertains not to the sequence of knowledge acquisition but to learning outcomes, and their classification into declarative/conceptual and procedural knowledge.

In sexual learning, learning outcomes can be declarative/conceptual or procedural, and are likely to be domain-specific because they pertain to sexually relevant topics. For example, the theme “learning the mechanics of sex” that Litsou and colleagues (2021) identified in their review on sexual learning, can be classified as a procedural domain-specific learning outcome because it relates to procedures/skills (“the mechanics”) within a certain domain (“of sex”). The theme “learning sexual identities and sexualities” can be classified as a declarative/conceptual domain-specific learning outcome, because it relates to factual knowledge about concepts within a specific domain (“sexual identities and sexualities”).

When considering OnlyFans as a potential source for sexual learning, the novelty of the platform, its wide user base, and cultural assimilation (Hamilton, 2022), pose questions on who uses the platform in relation to potential learning outcomes. Litam and colleagues (2022) recently investigated characteristics of OnlyFans users from the US and found that the majority of users in their study were white, married, males who identified as heterosexual or bisexual/pansexual. Those statistics are somewhat aligned with previous research about pornography use within the US reporting that men tend to use pornography more frequently than women (see meta-analysis from Petersen & Hyde 2010). Regarding the outcomes of pornography use, previous studies found that male pornography use was negatively associated with sexual quality of their female partners, while female pornography use was positively associated with female sexual quality (Poulsen et al., 2013). It has also been reported that male pornography use within relationships can negatively affect relationship quality, female self-esteem, and female sexual satisfaction (Stewart & Szymanski, 2012). However, the more recent review from Litsou and colleagues (2021) on sexual learning from pornography found a variety of learning outcomes across genders, including improvements in relationships, communication, sexual knowledge and confidence, and skills.

Questions for the Present Study

Accessing sexually explicit content through digital media coupled with the ability to browse and search those media anonymously provides easy access for people to engage with sexual media (Attwood et al., 2015; Paasonen, 2011; Spišák, 2016). OnlyFans' unique position between digital sex work and social media, along with the cultural assimilation of the platform (Hamilton et al., 2022) have decreased the stigma associated with joining the platform (Hamilton et al., 2022), resulting in a par-

ticularly large user base (The Associated Press, 2021). To our knowledge, there are no studies that have investigated OnlyFans in terms of sexual learning and its influence on users' sexual lives. The present study aims to close this gap by answering the following research questions:

- (1) How do OnlyFans users perceive the effects of OnlyFans on their sexual lives?
- (2) How do OnlyFans users perceive the effects of OnlyFans on sexual learning?
- (3) Are there relationships between users' age and learning outcomes?
- (4) Are there differences in learning outcomes based on users' gender?
- (5) Do the learning outcomes that OnlyFans users describe represent different types of knowledge (declarative/conceptual versus procedural)?
- (6) Are there unique themes among content creators?

Method

Sample

Initially, 472 OnlyFans users participated in our survey. After data cleaning (i.e., the removal of incomplete and/or nonsensical responses), the final sample size was 425 participants, all of whom reported to have used OnlyFans for sexual purposes within the three months prior to our survey. Participants' mean age was 37 ($SD=11.01$) and ranged between 18 and 74. 53.4% identified as male, 45.6% as female, 0.7% as non-binary or gender nonconforming, and 0.2% as transgender. In terms of sexual orientation, 80.9% identified as heterosexual, 12.5% as bisexual/pansexual, 5.2% as lesbian/gay, 0.2% as questioning/uncertain, and 0.7% as other (and described by participants as heteroflexible and sapiosexual). For relationship orientation, 61.2% reported that they preferred to be monogamous, 28.5% preferred to be in open relationships, 4.5% in polyamorous relationships, 3.5% preferred swinging, and 2.4% preferred to self-describe (committed; married; single). 82.1% reported to be currently in a romantic and/or sexual relationship. 49.2% were married, living with spouse, 17.4% single/not married/not currently partnered, 14.6% partnered and living with partner, 8.7% in a casual sexual relationship, 6.1% partnered not living with partner, 3.8% dating, 2.6% in polyamorous relationship(s), 1.4% married not living with spouse, 1.4% divorced, 0.5% separated, and 0.2% widowed. The racial and/or ethnic distribution was: 74.4% White, 15.3% Black of African, 11.8% Hispanic, Latiné/x or Spanish Origin, 3.5% Asian, 1.9% Native American/Canadian/Alaskan, 0.9% Middle Eastern/North African, 0.5% Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and 0.5% Multiracial (specified as Black, Italian, Cherokee, Irish). Participants reported a wide range of occupations and professions. Twenty-four participants reported to be sex workers, of whom 17 explicitly stated to work as content creators on OnlyFans for financial purposes. Multiple selections were possible for all demographic categories. Participants were recruited via *Qualtrics Panels* and reimbursed for their participation. The inclusion criteria for participation were: At least 18 years of age, residing in the US, and use of OnlyFans for sexual purposes within the past three months prior to the survey.

Table 1 *Descriptive Quantitative Questions and Results*

	Question	Response Scale	Results
1	How has your OnlyFans use influenced your sexual life? (With partners, by yourself, etc.)	-3 (extremely negatively) – +3 (extremely positively)	$M=1.23$ $Md=1.00$ $SD=1.27$
2	To what extent have you learned anything new about sexual practices in general on OnlyFans?	1 (learned nothing new) – 7 (learned many new things)	$M=4.86$ $Md=5.00$ $SD=1.83$
3	To what extent have you learned anything new about your personal sexual preferences on OnlyFans?	1 (learned nothing new) – 7 (learned many new things)	$M=4.88$ $Md=5.00$ $SD=1.82$
4	To what extent have you learned anything new about relationships on OnlyFans?	1 (learned nothing new) – 7 (learned many new things)	$M=4.63$ $Md=5.00$ $SD=1.89$
5	To what extent have you learned anything new about sexual health on OnlyFans?	1 (learned nothing new) – 7 (learned many new things)	$M=4.68$ $Md=5.00$ $SD=1.84$
6	To what extent have you tried anything new due to using OnlyFans (Examples: life changes, sexual practices, relationship practices, self-exploration)?	1 (tried nothing new) – 7 (tried many new things)	$M=4.88$ $Md=5.00$ $SD=1.71$

Ethical Considerations

This study was performed in line with the principles of APA. Approval was granted by the Ethics Committee of the authors' university (June 20, 2021, #36,343). Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Research Design and Materials

We implemented a mixed-method survey design. For our understanding of “mixed method studies”, we followed Tashakkori and Creswell's (2007) definition of “research in which the investigator collects and analyzes data, integrates the findings, and draws inferences using both qualitative and quantitative approaches or methods in a single study” (p. 4).

The survey was programmed in *Qualtrics* and consisted of a quantitative and a qualitative portion. After providing Informed Consent, participants were automatically directed to the survey questions, which were presented one at a time, following the programmed survey flow.

The quantitative portion of our study consisted of closed-format questions with Likert-type response formats or multiple-choice response options that were developed by the authors (see Table 1 for all quantitative measures). In addition, we asked a question about new activities participants tried due to their OnlyFans use with a variety of choice options (e.g., sex toy use, phone sex, identity exploration). The multiple-choice response options for all questions were developed based on previous studies in related areas, such as research on the use of technology to engage in sexual behavior, digital sex content creation, pornography as a means to explore gender and sexual identity, and sexual interests associated with use of pornography (Attwood et al., 2018; Fritz et al., 2022; Gesselman et al., 2020; Jahnen et al., 2022; Stegeman

2021; Walker & Kuperberg, 2022; Wignall 2019). The qualitative portion consisted of one open-ended question (“What new things have you learned from using OnlyFans in terms of sexual practices, relationships, communication, yourself, your personal preferences, or sexual health?”).

Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis Strategies

The quantitative questions were analyzed with SPSS-27, with descriptive statistics, correlations, regression analyses, and t-tests. Responses to the qualitative question were analyzed with thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In line with the goals for our study, thematic analysis was considered appropriate because it provides a flexible analysis approach, and is focused on deriving themes from the data. In contrast to content analysis, thematic analysis is not focused on quantifying the information that is mentioned by participants, and allows for any combination of inductive and deductive data aggregation and interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Neuen-dorf, 2018). We considered these latter aspects to be particularly relevant, due to the sensitive topic and the explorative nature of our investigation.

Results

Descriptive Quantitative Results

All 425 participants responded to each of our questions. The descriptive quantitative results are summarized in Table 1.

Of the 425 participants, only 37 (8.7%) of participants stated that they did not learn anything new about sexual practices, only 38 (8.9%) did not learn anything new about personal sexual preferences, only 49 (11.5%) did not learn anything new about relationships, and only 40 (9.4%) did not learn anything new about sexual health. The majority of participants reported learning outcomes in each of these domains (all $M > 4.63$, and all $Md = 5.00$, see Table 1).

When asked about the specific new activities they tried due to their use of OnlyFans, 175 participants (41%) reported toy use, 122 (28%) producing content, 121 (28%) sexual orientation exploration, 106 (25%) phone sex, 103 (24%) exchanging content, 95 (22%) fetishes, 86 (20%) camming, 78 (18%) multiple partners, 64 (15%) BDSM, 48 (11%) gender identity exploration, and 2 (<1%) other things (described by the two participants as “exchanging sexual content for money”, and “pee”). Only 29 (6.8%) reported that they did not try anything new after using OnlyFans.

Parametric Quantitative Results

We explored systematic relationships between participants’ responses to questions 1–6 (Table 1) with bivariate Pearson correlations. The results revealed significant positive correlations between all variables (all $p < .001$, Table 2). The more sexual learning participants reported in one area, the more they learned in other areas, and

Table 2 Bivariate Pearson Correlations

Question	N	1	2	3	4	5	6
1 How has your OnlyFans use influenced your sexual life?	425	--	0.457**	0.415**	0.415**	0.352**	0.408**
2 To what extent have you learned anything new about sexual practices in general on OnlyFans?	425	0.457**	--	0.818**	0.761**	0.714**	0.749**
3 To what extent have you learned anything new about your personal sexual preferences on OnlyFans?	425	0.415**	0.818**	--	0.782**	0.745**	0.783**
4 To what extent have you learned anything new about relationships on OnlyFans?	425	0.415**	0.761**	0.782**	--	0.811**	0.754**
5 To what extent have you learned anything new about sexual health on OnlyFans?	425	0.352**	0.714**	0.745**	0.811**	--	0.745**
6 To what extent have you tried anything new due to using OnlyFans?	425	0.408**	0.749**	0.783**	0.754**	0.745**	--

** $p < .001$

the more positively they perceived the influence of their OnlyFans use on their sexual lives.

Differences in sexual learning and effects on sexual lives (questions 1–6, Table 1) relative to age were explored with linear regression analyses. Three of the six linear regressions revealed significant results. First, age significantly predicted the extent to which participants learned something new about sexual practices, $b = -0.02$, $t(424) = -2.15$, $p = .032$. Age also explained a small but significant proportion of variance in learning about sexual practices, $R^2 = 0.01$, $F(1, 424) = 4.64$, $p = .032$. Second, age significantly predicted the extent to which participants learned something new about relationships, $b = -0.03$, $t(424) = -3.36$, $p < .001$. Age also explained a small but significant proportion of variance in learning about relationships, $R^2 = 0.03$, $F(1, 424) = 11.32$, $p < .001$. Third, age significantly predicted the extent to which participants learned something new about sexual health, $b = -0.02$, $t(424) = -2.49$, $p = .013$. Age also explained a small but significant proportion of variance in learning about sexual health, $R^2 = 0.01$, $F(1, 424) = 6.22$, $p = .013$. The negative b coefficients in all three significant regressions indicated that the younger the participants were, the more they learned from their use of OnlyFans.

Differences in sexual learning and effects on sexual lives (questions 1–6, Table 1) by gender were explored with independent-samples t -tests. Of the 425 participants, 227 identified as male and 194 as female, and only 4 identified as non-binary or transgender. We therefore focused on the comparisons between males and females. The results revealed no significant differences. Males and females reported similar levels of influence of OnlyFans on their sexual lives; similar levels of learning in terms of sexual practices, sexual preferences, relationships, and sexual health; and similar extents of trying something new due to using OnlyFans.

Qualitative Results

The three authors (one professor and researcher in Public Health and Human Sexuality, one professor and researcher in Educational Psychology, and one graduate student in Psychological Science) first identified codes and themes within the data individually, and then discussed and synthesized their insights in a committee-approach until consensus was reached. In thematic analysis, codes are the most basic segments of raw data that can be assessed in relation to a research question, whereas themes represent patterned responses that capture something important relative to that research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For the development of codes and themes, we used an inductive (i.e., data-driven) approach. After consensus on the themes was reached, we then used a deductive (i.e., theory-driven) approach to classify the themes into the type-of-knowledge categories of declarative/conceptual and procedural knowledge. The authors analyzed the qualitative data as a whole and then went back to examine the responses provided by content creators to determine if unique information was provided by this group in particular. We did not find unique information that was only provided by content creators and so we presented the findings based on all responses.

Regarding sensitivity, it is relevant to note that the three researchers identified as sex-positive, which may have impacted data perceptions. However, participants' responses were short, direct, and clearly formulated in the vast majority of cases, leaving little room for misinterpretation. Regarding trustworthiness, triangulation was implemented by selecting researchers from different fields (Public Health/Human Sexuality, Educational Psychology, and Psychological Science) who approach research on human sexuality from different perspectives. According to Nowell and colleagues (2017), this increases the credibility of and trustworthiness of results in thematic analysis. In addition, the qualitative results were interpreted alongside the quantitative results from this mixed-methods study, providing yet another layer of quality control. Below, we describe the themes we derived from the data set, and their classifications into types of knowledge. The participant statements quoted in parentheses are not exhaustive; they are examples.

Sexual Improvement and Expansion

Participants reported improvements in sexual functioning (“how to last longer during sex”); sexual pleasure and enjoyment (“how to get aroused”, “discovered new sexual pleasures”); sexual satisfaction (“new ways of satisfaction”); sexual health (“how to have a healthy sex life”, “healthy habits”); and sexual safety and consent (“condom use”, “how to handle sexual aggravation”). Only one participant reported a negative outcome due to their OnlyFans use (“learned that this makes me depressed”). Learning outcomes for sexual improvements included both declarative/conceptual knowledge (“new ideas”, “being aware of the STDs out there”, “learned about informed consent”) as well as procedural knowledge (“learned how to ask for informed consent”, “how to stimulate and maintain desire”, “how to have a healthy sex life”).

Participants also reported expansions of their sexual experiences, including new sexual configurations (“learned that I would like to try a threesome”); new sexual activities (“learned things to make sex interesting”); fetishes/BDSM (“how to feel

better about kinky sexual desires”, “about basic BDSM”), and use of specific sex tech in addition to the OnlyFans app itself (“learned all about camming”). Learning outcomes in expansions of sexual experiences included declarative/conceptual knowledge (“learned about safe words”, “that I have a foot fetish”) as well as procedural knowledge (“how to explore my fetishes”, “ways to explore each other’s kinks”).

Improvements in Relationships

Within this theme, participants reported improved communication (“more communication, keeps relationship happy and healthy”); improved knowledge of partner(s) (“understanding partner in relationship”); improved boundaries (“learned that I never want to ask my partner to feel like I’m asking her to do something sexually she does not want to do”, “learned that I can accept a no and she knows I can accept a no so our relationship is a lot stronger because of it”); greater intimacy (“learned about other intimate activities in addition to sex”, “have discovered how close and intimate my partner and I have become videoing ourselves, watching, editing, and sharing them”); and increased flexibility and openness to new shared experiences (“learned new ways of sexually interacting with partner”, “my husband and I started recording so we can watch later”, “exploring the idea of opening up our sex lives”, “learned that my wife enjoys watching OnlyFans together”).

There was again a mix of declarative/conceptual knowledge (“learned that I know I am happy with my love”, “learned love languages”) and procedural knowledge (“new methods to avoid boredom in the bedroom”, “how to satisfy my partner”). While the majority of participants reported improvements in relationships, one participant stated “I am practicing more sexual partners without my main one knowing”; one participant stated “keeping lots of secrets”; one participant said “my partner does not want to be intimate with me anymore”; and another participant reported that “communication sucks”, without further specifications.

Self-Improvement and Expansion

Participants reported increases in sexual confidence (“I have more self-confidence”); self-esteem (“boost in self-esteem and ego”); and self-knowledge (“even at my age, I can still have enjoyable sexual experiences that keep me feeling young and vibrant”; “it’s made me take a new look at myself”). Participants also stated that they experienced improved body-image and self-acceptance (“learned that there are a lot of people who prefer my body type”, “learned that the things I find quirky or weird about me others will find sexy and be turned on”) and increased comfort and permission to express oneself (“not be so embarrassed about who I am”, “to be more comfortable”, “I’ve learned how to open up and express myself”).

Participants also reported expansions in attraction (“learned that I have a type of woman I’m attracted to that I always dismissed before”, “learned that I like a specific type of men”); expansions in gender identity (“learned a lot about my gender identity and about queerness, and realized I wasn’t a woman”); and expansions in sexual orientation (“learned that I can be into transgender woman”, “learned about the beauty

Table 3 *Acquired Skills*

Skill Acquired	Example Quotes
Sexual Positions	“New positions” “Romantic sexual positions” “Learned more about Kamasutra”
Body Exploration/Stimulation	“Different ways to stimulate women” “How to explore a lady’s body”
Ways to Achieve Orgasm	“Different ways to climax” “Learned what can give better orgasm”
Masturbation Techniques	“Learned better masturbation techniques” “Learned a lot about making and controlling myself during feeling masturbating”
Oral Sex Techniques	“New styles of licking pussy” “New oral techniques” “Learned BJs”
Ways to Please One’s Partner/s	“How to satisfy my partner” “Learned how to satisfy my partner fast”
Toy Use	“How to use toys differently” “Experience with dildos”

of gay sex”, “learned that I enjoy sexual situations with women more than I do with men”).

The majority of learning outcomes participants reported within this theme represented declarative/conceptual knowledge about the self (“learned things about my sexual desires I didn’t know”), but some learning outcomes were procedural (“learned how to be more open with my body”).

Skill Acquisition

Within this theme, participants reported a variety of specific skills (i.e., procedural knowledge) they acquired due to their use of OnlyFans (see Table 3).

OnlyFans as Connection

Participants also reported that they feel a sense of community within OnlyFans, specifically mentioning “social interactions”, “making friends to share wholesome moments with”, “learning how to connect with content creators” (procedural knowledge); and “learning about local content creators”, “learned that there are lot more people like me who want to explore and try new things but are afraid to say or show it” (declarative/conceptual knowledge). However, one participant also mentioned that “there are strange people and a lot of harassment”.

Value-Related Comments

Some learning outcomes reflected a mix of declarative/conceptual and procedural knowledge regarding values in relation to social norms and culture, politics, and social justice (“learned that it’s important to normalize this kind of thing so there is

not such a taboo, especially for older individuals”; “learned that it’s not good to be so judgmental in life and sex”); and one participant explained that.

I don’t even like OnlyFans that much but I feel people should be allowed to do whatever they want as consenting adults. When they banned it made me want to help fight for it. Unjust to turn against the content creators who made OnlyFans successful. Feel for CC [content creators] who make their living there. Depressed that in America we have to deal with people uptight about sex in 2022. Thought we were past sexual hang ups and injustice against female body.

Other participant statements reflected generalized views pertaining mostly to presumed sexual preferences and roles of females (“learned what girls will do sometimes even just for a few dollars”, “women are really open and love odd shaped sex toys”, “how open women are to oral”, “that people are freaks when they can be anonymous”). Regarding generalized views on males, one participant with prior experience in online sex work stated that they “didn’t learn anything new except that guys will always pay to see you naked but I knew that from my camming site”. Another participant noted that “OF [OnlyFans] should promote more healthy sexual behaviors and stop allowing shitty content to be uploaded by amateurs and professionals; if abusing women is a turn-on then there’s an obvious problem”.

Discussion

Increased Internet access and innovative technologies to enhance sexuality through connections and knowledge (“sex tech”, as defined by Gallop 2020; Gesselman et al., 2020) are changing the ways people navigate their sexual lives (Gesselman et al., 2020). Most prior research has focused on potential negative outcomes of sex tech, especially within at-risk populations (Gesselman et al., 2020). Examples include studies on the effects of online dating apps on college students’ excessive drinking (Sawyer et al., 2017) and studies on negative outcomes on couple satisfaction due to a partner’s excessive pornography use (Poulsen et al., 2013). While it is important to investigate the risks associated with sex tech, it is also valuable to consider potential positive impacts of sex tech, and to investigate the outcomes of sex tech use in samples that are more representative of the general population (Gesselman et al., 2020). Aligned with this notion, the purpose of our study was to explore how OnlyFans users perceive the effects of their OnlyFans use on their sexual learning and sexual lives.

The 425 participants who took part in our study were US-American adults who used OnlyFans for sexual purposes, and our participant sample was diverse in terms of gender, sexual orientation, relationship preferences and relationship status, professional background, and ethnicity. Similar to the study by Litam and colleagues (2022), the OnlyFans users in our sample were predominantly White (74.4%) and heterosexual (80.9%). However, in our sample, there were almost as many females (45.6%) as males (53.4%) and only about half of our participants (49.2%) were married. The diversity and representativeness of our sample in comparison to national

demographics (<https://www.census.gov/>) align with the idea that the platform's strong representation in popular US-American culture and its resulting cultural assimilation are associated with less stigma and a wider user base in comparison to other sexually explicit platforms (Hamilton et al., 2022).

For this study, our main research questions focused on how OnlyFans users perceive the effects of OnlyFans on their sexual lives and their sexual learning. On average, participants rated the effect of their OnlyFans use on their sexual lives as more positive than negative. The qualitative data revealed that those positive effects pertained to sexual improvement and expansion, improvements in relationships, self-improvement and expansion, skill acquisition, and social connections through the platform. Only a few of the 425 participants reported negative outcomes in any of those domains. In terms of sexual learning, the vast majority of participants reported to have learned new things about sexual practices, preferences, relationships, and sexual health. The relationship between sexual learning and effects on OnlyFans use on sexual lives was positive; the more users learned on the platform, the more positively they perceived the effects of their OnlyFans use on their sexual lives. The correlations between different domains of learning (learning about sexual practices, personal sexual preferences, relationships, sexual health, and trying new things) were also positive, and revealed cumulative effects on learning; the more users learned in one domain, the more they learned in other domains.

The learning outcomes participants reported represented combinations of domain-specific declarative/conceptual and procedural knowledge. Acquiring domain-specific declarative/conceptual in conjunction with procedural knowledge is particularly useful for complex real-life situations, in which both types of knowledge need to be combined to solve problems and/or make well-informed decisions (de Jong & Ferguson-Hessler 1996). For example, it is helpful to understand what is meant by the concept of "consent" (declarative/conceptual knowledge) when learning how to ask for it (procedural knowledge); it is helpful to know facts about sexual health (declarative/conceptual knowledge) in conjunction with learning how to use a condom (procedural knowledge); it is helpful to be informed about different types of sexual and/or relationship configurations (declarative/conceptual knowledge) when considering how to explore them (procedural knowledge). Because this study did not include knowledge tests, our data does not allow for an objective assessment of the quality and accuracy of the reported learning outcomes. However, the data indicate that the participants in our sample benefited from their acquisition of both types of knowledge, as evidenced by the reported positive effects of OnlyFans use on their sexual lives, and the positive correlations between those effects and learning outcomes.

The themes we identified for sexual learning were similar to those reported in the review by Litsou and colleagues (2021), but wider in scope and detail. Similar to the theme "learning the mechanics of sex" (Litsou et al., 2021), we also found that participants acquired a variety of sexual skills through their use of OnlyFans, including new know-how on sexual positions and oral sex techniques, but also new knowledge on masturbation techniques, ways to achieve orgasm, and toy use. Similar to the theme "learning concerning sexual identities and sexualities" (Litsou et al., 2021), our participants also reported self-improvements and expansions in gender identity and sexual orientation, but they also reported improvements in self-esteem,

self-knowledge, body image, self-acceptance, permission and comfort to express themselves, and expansions in attractions toward others.

In addition, our data revealed that many of our participants reported improvements in relationships, including improvements in sexual interactions, satisfaction, intimacy, shared exploration and sexual expansion, and communication quantity and quality. These insights align with prior research by Smith (2013), who found that some individuals enhance their existing relationship by viewing sexually explicit material together. In our sample, participants also reported relationship improvements due to viewing OnlyFans content together, and/or producing OnlyFans content together for others to view. Some partnered individuals in our sample also mentioned an interest in exploring consensual nonmonogamy (CNM), with threesomes as the most frequently mentioned example. This finding extends prior research from Lehmillier (2020), who found that one-third of the 822 partnered participants in his study fantasized about consensual nonmonogamy, and that the majority of those who fantasized about it also wanted to try it.

Different from prior research on the use of pornography, especially within relationships (Poulsen et al., 2013; Stewart & Szymanski, 2012), we did not find gender differences on the effects of OnlyFans use on participants' sexual lives or sexual learning. Prior research on pornography use found more negative effects for females as compared to males in terms of partnership satisfaction, self-esteem, and sexual satisfaction (Poulsen et al., 2013; Stewart & Szymanski, 2012). We did not find such differences in our data. Both males and females in our sample reported more positive than negative outcomes of their OnlyFans use relative to its effects on their sexual lives, sexual practices, personal sexual preferences, relationships, sexual health, and their trying of new things.

In alignment with prior research (Holstrom et al., 2015), we found that age predicted sexual learning for sexual practices, relationships, and sexual health. The younger the participants were, the more they learned on OnlyFans. However, age only explained a small portion of the variance in sexual learning in each of those domains (all $R^2 \leq 0.3$). This might be due to the age distribution in our sample. The age range of our sample was 20 to 72 years, but the mean age of our participants was 37 and the median age was 35 ($SD = 11.01$). Only 10% of participants were younger than 25. In samples with a larger proportion of younger adults, the relationships between age and learning might be more pronounced.

While prior research reported outcomes of sexual learning from pornography mainly in relation to personal satisfaction and development (Litsou et al., 2021; Poulsen et al., 2013; Stewart & Szymanski, 2012), the participants in our study also shared insights on social norms and culture, politics, and social justice. Specifically, users shared that they find it important to normalize digital sex work, decrease judgement, protect sexual freedom and expression, acknowledge the rights of sex workers, and decrease taboos around digital sex work and sex in general. These user perspectives align with the perspectives of OnlyFans content creators, who shared similar thoughts when asked about their perceptions on the effect of OnlyFans on society, and the impact of potential bans of sexually explicit content on the platform (Lawlor et al., under review).

Because 24 participants of the sample of this study reported to be sex workers, with 17 of those 24 creating content on OnlyFans, we explored whether any unique themes emerged for these participants, but found no themes that were not also mentioned by the other users.

The majority of value-related comments were sex-positive. However, one participant also shared concerns regarding specific content on OnlyFans (“OF [OnlyFans] should promote more healthy sexual behaviors and stop allowing shitty content to be uploaded by amateurs and professionals; if abusing women is a turn-on then there’s an obvious problem”). Four other participants shared generalized negative views, which resembled unrealistic expectations and inadequate information about sex, especially regarding the roles and perceived preferences of females in sexual contexts. These examples align with the themes of “inadequate information through pornography” and “wrong lessons from pornography”, as observed by Litsou and colleagues (2021), and call for increased efforts to promote and facilitate porn literacy (Dawson et al., 2020).

Strengths and Limitations

Methodological strengths of this study include the combination of quantitative and qualitative data; triangulation in data evaluation and interpretation; a large sample size; and the diversity and relative representativeness of our sample in comparison to national demographics in terms of gender, age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and marital status. However, our sample consisted of individuals who had used OnlyFans in the three months prior to our survey. Therefore, we likely have a unique population of individuals who already feel comfortable enough with their sexuality to explore such platforms. Although a part of our study design, this may have influenced the results of our study.

With reference to the definition of Tashakkori & Creswell (2007), we refer to our investigation as a mixed-method study, but we acknowledge that qualitative research typically extends beyond the analysis of a single open-ended question, and that conceptualizations of mixed-method research vary among researchers. Our analysis of the open-ended survey question was conducted according to Braun and Clarke’s recommendations for using thematic analysis in psychology (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke discuss that there are different approaches to qualitative analytic methods, some of which are more firmly rooted in particular theoretical and epistemological positions and others (like thematic analysis) can be applied more flexibly (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Because our study was explorative and situated in a novel context (the OnlyFans platform), we found thematic analysis to be the most suitable qualitative analysis approach for our data set.

With regard to the integration of qualitative and quantitative data, Feters and Molina-Azorin discuss in the *Journal of Mixed Methods Research* (2015), that some researchers refer to “integration” as “how one brings together the qualitative and quantitative results” (Creswell, 2015) while others refer to “integration” as a feature of study design (Morse & Niehaus, 2009). While quantitative and qualitative data are presented sequentially in the result section in our study, both data sections share the

goal of exploring what users learn on OnlyFans, and the integration of the data takes place in the discussion, relative to the research questions.

Additionally, due to the limited amount of prior research on OnlyFans and the unique features of the platform, a theoretical framework could only be applied to the types of knowledge participants were likely to acquire. Theory-driven hypotheses on specific learning content or a-priori definitions of learning domains were neither available nor appropriate for this explorative study. Insights from this study are also limited to the socio-cultural context of the US, which was in the focus of this investigation. It is likely that user perceptions of OnlyFans use vary internationally, based on differences in the cultural assimilation of the platform, user base and demographics, and cultural value systems (such as focus on traditional versus secular-rational values, and survival versus self-expression; Inglehart & Welzel 2005; Döring et al., 2017).

Due to the focus of this study on learning and limitations in sample characteristics and in the amount of questions we were able to ask in this one survey, a number of interesting questions remain open for future research, such as how the experience of OnlyFans may differ for sex workers and users, how sex workers choose OnlyFans as their platform, how certain demographics (such as race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, relationship orientation, etc.) might be related to learning on OnlyFans, or what specific design features of OnlyFans may make the platform more or less likely than other platforms to be accessed for the purpose of sexual learning.

Implications and Conclusions

The results of this study provide insight into the ways users engage with unique platforms like OnlyFans for sexual learning, exploration, and expansion at individual and partner-levels. With few exceptions, the participants in this sample reported positive learning outcomes from their OnlyFans use, and positive effects on their sexual lives. The negative outcomes that were reported highlight the importance of facilitating porn literacy in formal and informal sexuality education. The insights on both positive and negative outcomes of OnlyFans use are relevant for research, practice, and education in digital spaces. As we persist in an age of technology, examining the ways that individuals and romantic and/or sexual partners explore technology for their own sexual learning will continue to be important. Adults currently have few resources for formal sexual education, but many will continue to seek out sexual information throughout the lifespan. OnlyFans and other similar platforms may become resources for sexual learning as they are further assimilated into the cultural and social systems we have in place.

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Data Availability The dataset from this study is not publicly available, due to the confidentiality of participants' responses.

Statements and Declarations

Competing Interests The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Ethics Approval This study was performed in line with the principles of APA. Approval was granted by the Ethics Committee of the authors' university (June 20, 2021, #36343).

Consent to Participate Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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