



OnlyFans: How Models Negotiate Fan Interaction

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Abstract

OnlyFans is a social media platform that allows individuals to sell subscription access to content and interact with subscribers. While open to all forms of creators, OnlyFans has become synonymous with pornographic and erotic content, particularly during its growth over the Covid-19 pandemic. Models on OnlyFans are paid by fans to provide an experience which is tailored to the fantasy of the fan. This study employed a qualitative reflexive thematic analysis to examine the complexities of creator-fan interactions, the challenges faced by models, and their strategies in managing those interactions. Seven Ireland-based OnlyFans models (87.5% cis-women), participated in semi-structured interviews via social media. Findings identified four key challenge domains: *boundaries*, *exposure*, *impression management*, and *interaction*. Models strategised in a number of ways, such as clarifying boundaries, protecting identities, managing impressions, and confining fan interactions to the platform itself. However, the ambiguous nature of the roles in this fan-model dynamic, often culminated in blurred lines between fantasy and reality, leading to boundary violations and problematic fan-model relationships. This dynamic has striking parallels with the challenges experienced between influencers and celebrities with their fans, emphasizing the universal nature of this digital interaction phenomenon. The findings bear significant implications for a broad range of individuals, including potential and active OnlyFans models, celebrities and influencers navigating fandoms, researchers exploring online interactions, and mental health professionals assisting clients in these contexts. This study acknowledges its limitation in exploring only the models' perspective, urging future research to incorporate fan perspectives of this dynamic.

Keywords OnlyFans · Fandom dynamics · Digital erotic content · Boundary negotiation

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Introduction

OnlyFans is a content sharing site where subscribers pay creators a fee to view a feed of images and video content. OnlyFans became popular among many content creators ranging from musicians to fitness personalities, as it allows individuals to cut out middlemen, providing a platform to sell content straight to the consumer (Pryce, 2019). While the platform has been open to most forms of digital media, a significant proportion of revenue generating content is often erotic and pornographic in nature. As a result, OnlyFans has become synonymous with such content during its growth over the Covid-19 pandemic (Bernstein, 2019; Shane, 2021). OnlyFans launched in 2016 and was revolutionary as it greatly eased access and payment for those wanting to broadcast sexual content (Ryan, 2019).

In 2021, OnlyFans announced plans to ban “sexually explicit” content. While never implemented, many content creators attempted to adapt their content towards more “acceptable nudity” as outlined in the then-proposed Acceptable Use Policy (Section 5, subsection i) (Cole, 2021; OnlyFans, 2021). OnlyFans’ (2021) definition of acceptable nudity allowed sexual content without the depiction of oral, anal, or vaginal penetration, aligning with Davis’ (2015) definition of erotica, as well as Matolcsi et al. (2020) definition of glamour modelling as photography depicting erotic poses (fully clothed, partially clothed, or nude). The study will speak with this subsection of OnlyFans creators engaged in erotic glamour modelling.

OnlyFans explicitly encourages creators to engage with their subscribers on a personal level, to tailor experiences for the customer. Interactions are facilitated through platform features such as livestreams, personal messages, and commissioned content (Croxford, 2021). Such creator-fan interaction is potentially complicated by the dynamics of *bounded authenticity*, defined by Bernstein (2007) as providing an intimate sexual experience while within the bounds of a monetary exchange. This introduces a blurring of boundaries between fans and models which may lead to confusion and conflict.

In this paper we are interested in exploring the creator-fan relationship on OnlyFans through the lens of *fandom* literature. Fandom refers to an emotional connection that a person develops to an individual(s), activity, or media object, which often prompts creative expression and involvement in communities of like-minded individuals known as fans (Lundy et al., 2020). Until recently, study of fan interaction in the context of the adult industry has largely been neglected (Coombes et al., 2020). However, recently there has been a move towards analysing erotica and pornography consumers as members of fandoms (Jackson et al., 2018; McKee, 2018; Williams, 2018). There is a dearth of literature on fandom study with relation to OnlyFans in particular, despite its rise in popularity (Hancock & Nilsson, 2021).

The current study examines the challenges that OnlyFans models face in interactions with fans, and the strategies they employ to address these challenges. We examine the following primary research question:

1. How do models on OnlyFans negotiate the challenges associated with interacting with fans on OnlyFans?

We also explore two secondary research questions:

2. What fan management strategies do models on OnlyFans use to address the challenges posed by fan interaction?
3. How do models on OnlyFans use impression management to make their presented-self more favourable to others?

This paper will begin with a review of literature in a variety of areas relating to the aforementioned research questions. Firstly, the existing research on peoples' experiences with OnlyFans will be discussed, as well as research in the related area of adult webcamming. Literature in areas such as online fandoms, microcelebrities and impression management will also be reviewed, as they provide useful analytic lenses through which we can understand our research questions. Following this, the methodology section will discuss the present study's research participants as well as how they were recruited and interviewed. The study's ethical considerations, analysis procedure, as well as the lead author's reflexive practice will also be discussed. The analysis section will describe and discuss the superordinate themes and subordinate themes which were generated from conducting the reflexive thematic analysis. The final section of this paper will present the conclusions, significance and implications of the research findings.

Literature Review

In this work, we are interested in understanding the challenges that OnlyFans models face in interactions with fans, and the strategies they employ to address these challenges. Our focus will be guided by previous studies examining related phenomena in other areas of online interactive sexual experiences, such as camming. To set the stage, we will first review what is already known about motivations and challenges in the OnlyFans sphere through existing research, before diving into closely related fields like camming to provide a broader context. Hamilton et al. (2022) explored the motivations behind content creation on OnlyFans, finding that the mitigation of stigma associated with the platform played a significant role in attracting new creators. The study identified several factors contributing to this reduction in stigma, including the mainstream acceptance of OnlyFans in popular culture, driven by celebrity involvement and widespread discussion on social media. This increased visibility and normalization of the platform made it more appealing for individuals without prior experience in the sex industry to begin creating content. Furthermore, the study found that platform features, such as the ability to block users and set boundaries, provided creators with a sense of control and safety, potentially reducing exposure to stigma. The COVID-19 pandemic also served as a motivator, with factors such as decreased availability of other gig-based work, job losses, and increased free time due to lockdowns driving more people to explore OnlyFans as a source of income. In addition to the reduced stigma, other motivations for content creation on OnlyFans included the autonomy and flexibility offered by the platform,

which are also prevalent in other gig-based work; as well as a desire to engage in sexual expression and having existing content, audiences and/or skills to leverage. Hamilton and colleagues (2022) also noted that a number of participants discussed their OnlyFans work with family and friends, further suggesting a reduction of stigma associated with participation on the platform. Cardoso and Scarcelli (2022) examined how Italian OnlyFans models prepared and presented themselves for their work; finding that in the world of OnlyFans, as with other platformed gig-related work, the lines between work, leisure, and the private and public spheres of intimacy become *blurred*. This boundary blurring effect of work on OnlyFans is a key insight from the literature and will be discussed throughout this paper. Despite the paucity of literature on fan interaction on OnlyFans, research on similar dynamics in tailored digital erotic experiences have been examined in the area of adult webcamming (otherwise referred to as Camming).

Interactive Digital Sexual Experiences and Adult Webcamming

With an understanding of OnlyFans, we now move to examine camming—a field with more robust research—as it offers valuable parallels and insights into fan interactions in interactive online sexual environments. Camming is defined by Bleakley (2014) as involving a performer filming a livestream to an online audience in exchange for monetary compensation. These performances are often sexual in nature and differ from traditional online erotica or pornography in terms of their level of interactivity. The arrival of camming marked a fundamental shift in the sex industry. A new online market emerged offering sexualized online services provided by models and sexual performers. Many individuals working in this industry now conduct a portion of or all of their work in an online setting (Jones, 2015). Like street level sex work, camming also involves “bounded authenticity” (Bernstein, 2007, p. 6), or providing an intimate sexual experience within the bounds of a monetary exchange. According to Jones (2016) the live video and the interactive elements of camming allow performers to create personalized performances for audience members. These synchronized interactions enable audience members to have a genuine experience, one perceived as having value due to its perception as an authentic interaction with a “real” woman (Jones, 2016).

Jones (2016) examined how women involved in camming negotiated the benefits and dangers associated with it. By examining these benefits and dangers, this study by Jones (2016) provides insights into the dynamics of fan management strategies employed in the negotiation of fan interactions that are also relevant to the experiences of OnlyFans models. The most common dangers reported in Jones’ (2016) study were unauthorized recording and resharing of clips of performances, also known as “Capping”; leaking of identifiable information of the model, also known as “Doxxing”; and harassment. Participants reported that pleasure was the main benefit of the job, this pleasure being in two forms. Firstly, sexual pleasure and, secondly, affectual benefits derived from emotionally intimate interactions with fans. Jones (2016) investigated what dangers camming models experienced and what

mitigation strategies were incorporated to address these. The dangers, along with their mitigation techniques are listed in Table 1.

Similar dangers of camming observed by Jones (2016) have been reported by some models on OnlyFans, such as experiences of harassment, doxxing and threats (Croxford, 2021). The current study aims to explore similar dynamics on OnlyFans. This study provides a rich qualitative analysis of said dynamics, drawing directly on in-depth interviews with OnlyFans models who engaged in glamour modelling. By contrast, Jones (2016) examined forum posts of individuals in the camming community engaged in modelling and/or sex work, which provides limited insight into the dynamics of fan management strategies employed in the negotiation of fan interactions.

The challenges of managing fan interactions are not isolated solely to interactive online sexual experiences such as those reported by Camming models and OnlyFans models. Similar experiences to those described in Jones' (2016) study have been reported in a wide range of fandoms and these challenges have grown more complex as fan interactions have moved online.

The Challenges of Online Fan Interaction

We've looked at OnlyFans and camming, where fan interactions are sexual and monetised. However, the issue of managing fan interactions isn't unique to these platforms, and understanding broader challenges in online spaces provides additional context. The challenges of fan interaction have been highlighted by many, from musicians (Baym, 2012) to fan convention organizers (Jones, 2018). New challenges have emerged as fan interaction has moved online. Zubernis and Larsen (2012) explain that the interaction between celebrity and fan has become increasingly reciprocal as social media platforms have abolished the traditionally unidirectional methods of fan interaction. Increasingly audiences expect individuals at the centre of fandoms to engage with their fanbase. Baym (2015) refers to this as relational labour.

Baym (2012) examined how musicians interact with and view their online fans, finding that musicians often experienced *blurred boundaries* between fans and friends which often raised interpersonal challenges. Musicians used a range of

Table 1 Dangers Associated with Camming and Mitigation Strategies Employed (adapted from Jones, 2016)

Danger	Mitigation strategies
Stigma	Protect Anonymity
Doxxing (Identity Exposed)	Security/ Privacy Measures
Harassment	Banning
Capping (Unauthorized Recording)	Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) take-downs Being more selective about platform and price of entry Capitalize on it as free advertising

Adapted from "'I Get Paid to Have Orgasms" Adult Webcam Models' Negotiation of Pleasure and Danger" by A. Jones (2016), *Signs*, 42(1), 227–256. Copyright 2016 by The University of Chicago

strategies to address these challenges, balancing needs to protect themselves and their loved ones, whilst also protecting the interests of their fans. Baym (2012) found that a number of musicians engaged their fans as friends rather than impersonal fans. Many argue that the interaction between fan and celebrity creates a “false” sense of intimacy in which the fan feels more connected to the celebrity than vice versa, commonly referred to as a parasocial relationship (Beer, 2008; Marwick & Boyd, 2011). However, Baym (2012) found that most musicians reported having intimate moments with their online fans. The real-time fan feedback provided by social media can provide instantaneous social support to artists. Baym (2012) argued that this intimacy between fan and celebrity exists on a continuum; ranging from impersonal fans to fans becoming viewed more as friends. Baym (2012) argues that movement along this continuum is continually renegotiated through interaction. Baym (2012) found that artists also reported challenges such as deciding what is appropriate to disclose to fans and dealing with excessively emotional fans “in ways both affectionate and hostile” (p. 301).

In order to understand why fan interaction on the internet is so fraught with challenges, we must first explore how the instantaneous connections facilitated by the emergence of the internet have fundamentally transformed the dynamics of fan interaction and fandoms as a whole.

The Internet’s Influence on Fandoms

To better understand how fan interactions have evolved, we will delve further into how the internet has changed the dynamics between fans and those they follow. With the growth of the internet, there has been a change in the perception of celebrities and the extent to which they are expected to engage with their fans. Dyer (1997, as cited in Marshall, 1997) argued that the traditional Hollywood conception of the celebrity, placed heavier emphasis on the distinction between image versus reality. This created an expectation for the celebrity to remain aloof from their fans.

The current research is not merely an extension of existing online fandom literature, but rather it identifies and seeks to fill a glaring gap. While previous studies have examined the relationship between celebrities and fans, there is scant focus on how this dynamic plays out in monetized and often sexualized online spaces like OnlyFans. This study aims to make significant contributions to theories surrounding online fan interactions and microcelebrity studies, and the concept of sexualized labour in a digital context. Practically, the findings could equip OnlyFans models and similar content creators with strategies for fan interaction, while also informing platform policies and digital governance strategies. The knowledge generated could also have applications for other emerging platforms where similar fan-creator dynamics may exist. Having established the broader relevance of this investigation, we now turn our attention to the core aspects of content on OnlyFans, beginning with the fundamental differences between erotica and pornography.

Defining Erotica Versus Pornography: Implications and Perspectives

Having established the broader relevance of this investigation, it's crucial to define the kind of content being produced and consumed on OnlyFans. This sets the stage for discussing the challenges and strategies specific to OnlyFans models. In defining and discussing the core aspects of content on OnlyFans, we begin by discussing the fundamental differences between erotica and pornography as there is often confusion surrounding the distinction between the two. According to Davis (2015), erotica in contemporary culture is considered to be literary or artistic work that contains themes or depictions of sexuality. However, unlike pornography, there is no depiction of oral, anal, or vaginal penetration in erotica. Glamour modelling is a form of photography involving models adopting erotic poses (fully clothed, partially clothed, or nude) (Matolcsi et al., 2020). One could argue that glamour modelling falls under erotica according to Davis' (2015) distinction, as it has sexual qualities but does not depict oral, anal, or vaginal penetration. OnlyFans allows both erotic and pornographic forms of content on their platform, however this study will focus solely on models producing erotic content on OnlyFans in the form of glamour modelling.

This distinction between erotica and pornography, and its practical implications for those who model on platforms like OnlyFans, becomes particularly intriguing when viewed through the lens of feminist philosophy. Notably, the school of thought known as "sex radicals" has argued that female sexuality is dependent on both *danger* and *pleasure* (Snitow et al., 1983; Vance, 1984). Vance (1984) argues that female sexuality has long been seen as either dangerous or pleasurable, but rarely both, going on to suggest that women's sexual experiences involve a complex interplay of both of these factors. In the past, Vance (1984) argues perspectives which focused solely on danger were used to police and restrict women's sexuality, leading women to view their own desires as threatening. Equally, suppression of discussions of sexual pleasure were also used to disempower women. Vance's pleasure/danger theory insists on the validity of women's subjective, complex experiences of sexuality. Generalizations that reduce women's lives to victimhood or prescriptions for the "right" kind of sex fail to capture this complexity. Weitzer (2009) further posits that "both the oppression and empowerment perspectives are one-dimensional and essentialist" (p. 6), often ignoring evidence showing substantial variation in how sex work is organized and experienced. Weitzer (2009) offers an alternative perspective referred to as the *polymorphus paradigm* which proposes victimization, exploitation, choice, job satisfaction and other dimensions should be treated as variables that differ situationally, not constants. Weitzer (2009) explains that sex workers' risk of violence, dependence on third parties, and relationships with clients vary tremendously based on factors such as type of sex work, venue, geographical location, and other structural conditions.

Vance's (1984) pleasure/danger theory of female sexuality provides a compelling illustration of the factors conditioning women's participation in the creation of erotic or pornographic content, which was further explored in relation to the pleasures and dangers experienced by Camming models in Jones' (2016) study. The current study seeks to extend this dialogue by examining similar dynamics. However, the focus

will be shifted to the challenges faced by models creating content on OnlyFans and the strategies they adopt to address these.

OnlyFans and Microcelebrities/Influencers

Now that we have explored the nuances of content on OnlyFans and the influence of the internet on fandom, we turn our attention to the unique intersection between OnlyFans models and microcelebrities. This allows us to narrow our focus back to the primary subject of this study: OnlyFans models. As the name implies, OnlyFans serves to provide individuals with a platform to create fandoms around their content. We argue that OnlyFans models are microcelebrities according to the definitions of Senft (2008) and Marwick and Boyd (2011), as OnlyFans models use social media to create an audience for themselves, they view their audience as a fanbase, and impression management is utilized in order to make one's presented self favourable to others. As previously mentioned, many influencers now produce erotic content for audiences through OnlyFans (Lykousas et al., 2020). According to van der Nagel (2021) OnlyFans can be viewed as a not suitable for work (NSFW) layer to other social media platforms as OnlyFans is largely interdependent on other social media platforms such as Instagram and Twitter in order for content producers to build audiences. As previously discussed, one of the main strategies in building an audience used by microcelebrities/influencers, both on and off OnlyFans, is *impression management*.

Impression Management on OnlyFans

Impression management refers to processes an individual uses to control how others perceive them (Goffman, 1959; Leary, 2001). In Goffman's (1959, 1963) conception of impression management, he views the self not as a fixed construct within the individual, but a fluid social process which one projects publicly to shape the behaviour of others. Drawing comparisons to the realm of theatre, Goffman proposes that social interactions are akin to performances, where individuals are seen as actors presenting themselves to an audience, carefully guiding and controlling the impressions they form. Actors adapt their performances to their audiences, and both actors and audience cooperate in negotiating and maintaining the working consensus of the situation. Individuals participate in impression management by enacting a "line" or pattern of verbal and non-verbal behaviours that express their perspective of a situation; through this, giving an evaluation of themselves and those participating in said interaction. A person experiences an increase in social value by effectively performing their "line" (Goffman, 1967).

In the world of the microcelebrity/influencer, impression management is key to making one's presented self favourable to others (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). In the area of erotic and sexual fandoms, impression management through the presentation of one's self as sexually desirable is important, not just in terms of physical appearance, but also in terms of interactions with fans. Cardoso and Scarcelli (2022) examined how OnlyFans models prepared and presented themselves for their work,

finding that models often focused on the portrayal of the “self as a producer, as an entrepreneur, as a transformer of the self, and of the self’s body” (p. 115).

This study will aim to explore the impression management strategies utilized by OnlyFans models in attracting and retaining an audience on the platform, as well as other strategies implemented by OnlyFans models to address the various challenges they encounter in fan interactions.

Scope and Focus of Current Study

The current study focuses on models using OnlyFans to monetize their modelling activities, specifically those engaged in glamour modelling. Building on Baym’s (2015) concept of relational labour, which highlights the *heightened expectation of intimacy* between individuals at the centre of fandoms and their fans, this study aims to explore the strategies employed by models on OnlyFans in response to challenges, which protect both themselves and the integrity of their subscribers’ experiences.

While the study is inclusive of models of various genders, it’s important to note two key reasons for an initial emphasis on models who were women. First, much of the existing literature has been centred around the experiences of women in the realms of sexualised or emotional labour (Cardoso & Scarcelli, 2022; Jones, 2016; Weitzer, 2009). This makes it an appropriate starting point for extending discourse into the sphere of OnlyFans. Second, it has been suggested that challenges experienced in interacting with fans on OnlyFans may differ based on gender (Travers, 2023). This view arises from literature such as Vanwesenbeeck (2013) who suggested that compared to men, women sex workers may face unique challenges due to factors such as economic disparities, heightened stigma, increased scrutiny, and differences in autonomy and control.

However, it should be highlighted that this study aims to extend the existing dialogue by exploring the experiences of OnlyFans models across a spectrum of genders. All participants in the study reported catering to a fanbase that was predominantly men. This provides a nuanced understanding of the complexities and variances in fan interactions and challenges across genders and sexual orientations, allowing the study to delve into these nuances without presuming that gender is the primary or sole determinant of these experiences.

The current study examines the following primary research question:

1. How do models on OnlyFans negotiate the challenges associated with interacting with fans on OnlyFans?

As well as the following secondary research questions:

2. What fan management strategies do models on OnlyFans use to address the challenges posed by fan interaction?
3. How do models on OnlyFans use impression management to make their presented self more favourable to others?

Methodology

Participant Demographics

All participants were required to be aged 18 or older. The median age was 23 years, and mean age was 25.5 years. The gender distribution of participants ($n=7$) was 87.5% cis-women and 12.5% cis-men. It is not possible to determine if the gender distribution of the current study reflects that of OnlyFans, as the company does not report this information. However, a survey of 3,058 current content creators on OnlyFans conducted by Wilson (2022), found the gender distribution to be 54% men and 46% women.

The recruitment of participants for this study presented distinct challenges due to the private and potentially stigmatized nature of OnlyFans content creation. The sensitivity of the topic, coupled with privacy concerns, made many potential interviewees hesitant to engage. Despite the limited sample size, the insights provided by the participants offer a significant contribution to our understanding of this area of online interactions.

All participants were currently living in Ireland. The decision to recruit participants residing in the same country as the authors was based on what is referred to as ‘cultural commonality’ which is a belief that researchers should share the same social, cultural, and linguistic qualities as the research participants (Ramji, 2008; Song & Parker, 1995). This is also referred to as conducting research from an “insider perspective” (Liamputtong, 2010). Merriam et al. (2001) argues that “being an insider means easy access, the ability to ask more meaningful questions and read non-verbal cues, and most importantly be able to project a more truthful, authentic understanding of the culture under study” (p. 411).

The present study’s participants had a mean of 116.67 fans subscribed to their OnlyFans accounts ($SD=70.94$, $Mdn=130$, range: 40–180). The mean social media following, based on the most popular social media account (Twitter or Instagram) for each participant, was 3,807.33 followers ($SD=5,368.24$, $Mdn=948$, range: 474–10,000). Participants earned a mean of \$967 per month ($SD=562.97$, $Mdn=\$900$, range: \$440–\$1560). The mean subscription price charged by participants was \$9.33 per month ($SD=3.78$, $Mdn=\$10.99$, range: \$5–\$12). Participants interviewed had a median of 10 months experience on OnlyFans, with a mean of 8.7 months experience. Three of the participants had stopped using OnlyFans within less than 6 months before participating, two of these participants had left voluntarily and the remaining participant had been banned for violating terms of service. All participants in the present research study published content which was intended for sexual consumption by an audience of men.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited by means of opportunity sampling via social media platforms including Twitter, Reddit and WhatsApp. On Twitter, the search query

syntax “near:location” was used to search for Tweets containing the term “OnlyFans” within the Republic of Ireland. On Reddit, the search feature was used to find groups or “Sub-Reddits” for promoting OnlyFans creators within Ireland. Users who had posted promoting their OnlyFans page were contacted via direct message, informed of the nature of the study, and asked whether they would be interested in participating.

Participants were also recruited through the first author’s own extended social network. The first author reached out to friends and asked them to pass along his contact details to anyone they knew who had experience in modelling on OnlyFans, with WhatsApp being used to inform individuals of the nature of the study and explore potential interest in participation.

Interview Data Collection

The present qualitative research study used semi-structured interviews as an empirical source, with a discussion guide being developed for same. Items of discussion were formulated with the intent of exploring the current study’s research questions. These research questions had been inductively generated from a literature review of previous findings in the study of fandoms, microcelebrities/influencers and interactive online sex work.

Procedure

Participants were engaged via social media and sent a copy of the current study’s information sheet (Appendix 1) which included all of the questions that were on the interview discussion guide. Once a participant expressed interest in participating, an agreed time for a videoconference call facilitated by Zoom was arranged. Participants were sent a consent form to fill out and have ready for the interview.

At the beginning of the interview, the participant was greeted by the first author and thanked for their attendance. The purpose of the current research study was reiterated and the participant was informed that consent would be reaffirmed throughout the interview, allowing participants to skip questions without withdrawing participation.

After the interview was completed, the participant was thanked for their participation and given a debrief sheet which reiterated the purpose of the current study and signposted participants to relevant mental health services. This was done in the event that a participant experienced any distress or discomfort as a result of conducting the interview.

Interview Data Processing

The semi-structured interviews were audio recorded. This audio was transcribed into text using the assistance of the dictate feature which is included as part of Microsoft OneDrive, the cloud data storage service provided by the authors’ higher education institution. The transcribed data was double-checked for

transcription errors by the first author before being sent to participants to confirm accuracy prior to qualitative analysis. Following the successful review of the transcripts, audio recordings of interviews were deleted. Transcripts were then processed in order to redact identifying features such as names, places and other identifying details. Participants were assigned participant numbers as identifiers.

Ethics

Due to the sensitive nature of some of topics being discussed, the present study excluded individuals from participating who felt they had experienced significant harm or trauma through their participation in OnlyFans. This was necessary as the first author was not qualified in administration of psychological aftercare. Additionally, it was decided that individuals who engaged in more graphic forms of sex work, such as the performance of sex acts, would also be excluded from taking part in the present research study.

The present study incorporated principles of continuous consent (Klykken, 2021) in order to provide participants with as many opportunities to withdraw their participation as possible. Participants were sent all the interview questions and topics of discussion before taking part and were told they could elect to skip questions while remaining a participant in the research study. When moving between topics of discussion, the participant was given foresight of the next proposed topic of discussion, and consent was reaffirmed before continuing.

Reflexivity

As a heterosexual man, the first author initially expected to speak only with OnlyFans models who were women. He had to consider whether it was appropriate to be posing questions to these women, given they often have to deal with fans who are men that may treat them disrespectfully, and he shared many of same demographics as the models' audiences. The first author was also aware that his gender might make him oblivious to certain cultural elements, such as the experience of being "mansplained" to, which could hinder his ability in relating to women's experiences. Recognizing Ireland's largely patriarchal society, where women's voices have often been deemed less important; the first author wanted to amplify the voices of those who may not typically have been heard in research in the past, rather than overshadowing them with his own.

In terms of his own biases, The first author acknowledges the influence of his upbringing in a Roman Catholic home and education in Catholic schools on his world-view particularly in areas such as sexuality, gender roles, and morality. Although he has grown to challenge some of these teachings, the first author must consider the influence that they have had in shaping his biases.

Plan for Analysis

A reflexive thematic analysis was implemented as described by Braun and Clarke (2021). This approach is theoretically and ontologically flexible, and as such the first author must declare the epistemological and ontological base underpinning his analysis. This research was carried out from a critical realist position which incorporates a realist ontology (assumes the existence of a shared external reality outside of the human mind) in combination with a relativist epistemology (different methods of researching reality produce different interpretations of reality). Critical realism asserts there is a direct relationship between what presents itself in captured data or observations and what is happening in reality. However, the data is just a partial recording of reality; it is not a direct reflection of reality itself, and thus we must draw upon what is known outside of the data in order to be able to interpret what was observed in the context of a wider reality (Willig, 2012).

Coding and Theme Generation

A reflexive thematic analysis was conducted following the guidelines outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021), with each of the six phases clearly documented, in order to track the development of codes and generation of themes ensuring the analysis was conducted with rigour and the results produced were dependable.

The first author first familiarized himself with the data by conducting and transcribing the semi-structured interviews himself, using the annotation feature within NVivo to record his thoughts and insights. He then began developing initial codes using an inductive research question-guided approach. Multiple passes were made through transcripts while coding, revisiting sparsely coded transcripts in order to ensure no portions of interview data had been neglected.

Once satisfied with coding, the first author clustered codes to generate themes (Braun & Clarke, 2021), using NVivo's concept map feature to arrange the codes visually. He looked for broader patterns in the data and clustered codes accordingly. Codes were clustered in a fashion that was inductive and data-driven whilst being directed in trying to answer the present study's research questions. The first author must acknowledge his own role in the clustering process as his subjective interpretation of the data steered the code clustering and theme generation process.

The initial themes generated overlapped and inter-related with one another, prompting refinement and development by trimming codes or reconstructing themes through the merging or separating of initial themes. With more well-defined themes, the first author thought about how the codes within the themes could convey a narrative. From here he began developing a thematic structure with superordinate and subordinate themes.

Analysis

A reflexive thematic analysis was carried out following the method outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021). The research questions posed in this study aimed at exploring what challenges models face in their interactions with fans, and the strategies used in negotiating these challenges. Arranging theme structure into superordinate and subordinate themes is usually seen more in phenomenological approaches to qualitative research. Superordinate themes tend to reflect phenomena experienced by a group of participants as a whole (Willig, 2008). The first author felt that this approach to structuring themes was appropriate as the themes of challenges and strategies were experienced by all participants; it also organized the analysis in a way that would clearly answer the aforementioned research questions. The first author decided to label the problem domains, where participants encountered challenges and implemented strategies, as the subordinate themes. These problem domains were in the areas of boundaries, exposure, impression management and interaction, with impression management being one of the areas of focus mentioned in the present study's research questions.

In describing and discussing the findings below, the first author has prepared diagrams which will assist in describing the challenges and strategies within each problem domain with lines of association drawn between challenges and strategies in order to illustrate their relationship to one another. When discussing the challenges and strategies within each problem domain, quotations from participants will be used to illustrate the nature of the challenge or strategy. In the interests of explaining the relationship between challenges and strategies while referring to the prepared diagrams, challenge codes have been labelled using the Latin alphabet, whereas strategy codes have been labelled using Roman numerals. Hyphens have been used to illustrate the associations between said challenges and strategies (i.e., Fig. 1A-ii). In the case of the problem domain of negotiating exposure, emoticons are used to differentiate the experiences of models who concealed their face on OnlyFans (☹) versus models who revealed their face (☺).

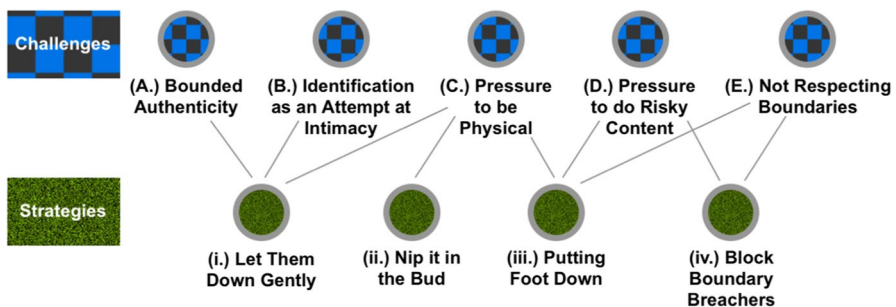


Fig. 1 Challenges and Strategies Observed Within Problem Domain of Boundaries. *Note.* Blue Checkered Latin Alphabet = Challenges, Green Speckled Roman Numerals = Strategies

Negotiating Boundaries

In human relationships and interaction, *boundaries* are limits we impose on ourselves and others. As we are individuals inhabiting a shared social space, boundaries help us fit into our environment by drawing lines around things which we value. We enforce our boundaries by imposing rules (Petronio et al., 1998). The negotiation of boundaries within this context refers to limits which models imposed on themselves and fans with regards to acceptable behaviour. Models often faced challenges relating to fans’ perception and respect of models’ boundaries. Firstly, models experienced challenges as a result of fans either misunderstanding or lacking awareness of models’ boundaries. As models were operating within *bounded authenticity*, attempting to provide an erotic experience which appears genuine in exchange for monetary compensation (Bernstein, 2007), fans at times may have become mistaken in perceiving the attraction and connection they had felt for the model was equally reciprocal (Fig. 1A). This aligns with arguments made by Beer (2008) and Marwick and Boyd (2011), who took the position that online fan-celebrity interactions can create a false sense of intimacy which makes fans feel more connected to celebrities than vice versa. This confusion led to further challenges, one of these being when fans made efforts to connect with models in their personal life, usually by finding their personal social media profiles. In contrast to other more malicious motivations for de-anonymization (Fig. 2B, C), Participant 3 felt this was often done in an attempt to gain a heightened level of intimacy with the model (Fig. 1B):

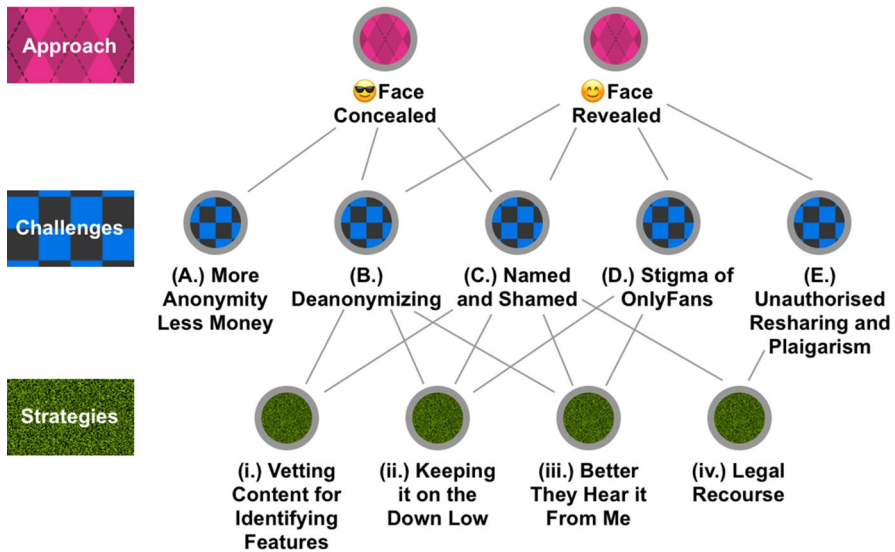


Fig. 2 Challenges and Strategies Observed Within the Problem Domain of Exposure. *Note.* Pink Argyle Emoticons=Exposure Approaches, Blue Chequered Latin Alphabet=Challenges, Green Speckled Roman Numerals=Strategies

“There is emotions involved. [...] feelings can get skewed and people do overstep boundaries, whether they realize it or not. That’s why I think people take it the wrong way, people get really upset when things like that happen. But maybe in the lad’s eyes, they don’t see it as that. They’re just seeing it as trying to connect with this girl that they were talking to for a while.”

Models spoke of other challenges which arose when fans challenged a model’s boundaries. To a certain extent, participating in any form of media requires an individual to adopt roles and engage in performance. Ferris (2001) argues that audiences often only get to know a media personality through the role they play in these performances, which can lead audiences to expect a media figure to behave the same way that they do in their media performances. Within the context of OnlyFans, models often adopt a hyper-sexualized self-portrayal in performing their role which attempts to cater to fan fantasy. Fans’ responses to this can be confusing and problematic. This blurring of boundaries that the models in our study experienced mirrors the findings of Cardoso and Scarcelli (2022) who observed that OnlyFans models experienced a blurring of lines between the private and public spheres of intimacy, an experience that was reported by our participants as well. As models strive to balance the management of fan expectations and fantasies, they are navigating the delicate line between their personal and professional lives.

A number of models spoke of fans assuming that they were willing to engage in escorting sex work in the physical world. OnlyFans has strict policies against solicitation of in-person sex work and has put measures in place blocking any requests for said services (Lawless, 2021). However, fans were either unaware of these policies, or intentionally circumvented these measures in order to pressure models to engage physically (Fig. 1C). Participant 6 explained how the confusion arising from bounded authenticity leads fans to ask to meet physically:

“If I’m texting a fan back, like, they’ll think I’m interested or I’ll get texts saying, ‘oh like I’m passing through [redacted] on Monday’. [...] They just want to meet you, even though you could have all over your homepage that you don’t do meets. So, like it’s really annoying.”

A number of models addressed the aforementioned challenges by adopting a strategy of aiming to balance rejecting a fan’s advances whilst simultaneously trying to retain them as a fan (Fig. 1A-i, B-i, C-i). Participant 7 outlined their approach:

“So, I kind of said, ‘look, I’m really glad you’re enjoying my content, and I appreciate your viewership. But I’m not actually going to meet anyone in real life’ [...] I guess I’m trying to be polite, and firm, but I’m trying not to annoy them because I need them to watch.”

This a delicate balancing act for models. Fans are paying for models to perform a role which caters to their sexual fantasies. However, a model can only fulfil a fan’s fantasies up to a certain point. When a fan goes beyond this point, models are suddenly put in the awkward position of having to reject the fan, while still trying to sustain their fantasies. As previously seen with Participant 6’s approach, some models opt to let fans down gently in an attempt to preserve fan fantasy (Fig. 1A-i, B-i, C-i),

whereas other models tried to take a firmer approach (Fig. 1C-ii). However, there were instances in which fans intentionally pushed models' boundaries. Not only was there pressure from fans to engage physically, but also to engage in increasingly precarious performances (Fig. 1D). Participant 7 outlined their experience:

“I knew that they [the fan] wanted me to portray as someone in their life. But the script was about incest. [...] I couldn't do it because, you know, they were legit trying to get me to look like someone they had in mind and re-enact, like about incest. Like that could have been their sister or something.”

When dealing with these sorts of intentional boundary breaches, models adopted a more hard-line strategy by putting their foot down and standing up for themselves (Fig. 1D-iii, E-iii). Although, there were instances in which the nature of breaches warranted the utilization of the blocking and mute featured offered by OnlyFans (Fig. 1D-iv, E-iv). This use of blocking and mute functionality relates to the findings of Hamilton et al. (2022) who found these OnlyFans features afforded creators more autonomy to enforce boundaries, potentially reducing exposure to stigma.

In summary, Models struggled with fans misunderstanding the nature of their relationship, leading to fans attempting to form personal connections (Fig. 1B) or make inappropriate requests (Fig. 1C, D). Much of this misunderstanding arose from the "bounded authenticity" aspect of their work (Fig. 1A), blurring lines between fantasy and reality. To navigate this, some models aimed to politely reject advances while retaining fans (Fig. 1A-i, B-i, C-i), others taking a firmer stance against these boundary violations (Fig. 1C-ii D-iii, E-iii), and utilizing platform features like blocking or muting when necessary (Fig. 1D-iv, E-iv). Maintaining boundaries was an ongoing negotiation, as models balanced catering to fantasy experiences for monetization while enforcing limits on unacceptable fan behaviour.

Negotiating Exposure

The theme negotiating exposure refers to the extent to which models exposed themselves to their fans and the challenges arising from this exposure. Models had two different approaches to negotiating exposure, these being the decision to either conceal (Fig. 2, ☹️) or reveal their face (Fig. 2, 😊) when performing in their role to fans. One of the challenges arising from this was that there was a trade-off between having anonymity at the expense of earning less (Fig. 2, ☹️-A). Participant 1, explained their experience:

“Keeping your anonymity, [...] while trying to promote is difficult because you do kind of have to have your face in things for people to actually be interested.”

Models who chose to reveal their face left themselves more vulnerable to identification and de-anonymization (Fig. 2, 😊-B). The risk posed by this was that people within a model's personal life may become informed of their presence on OnlyFans, and as a result the model may face stigma (Fig. 2, 😊-D). Multiple models recalled instances in which fans engaged in efforts to “out” them to

people in their personal life (Fig. 2, ☹-C, ☹-C). This mirrors the danger of doxxing reported by women involved in camming in Jones' (2016) study. Models who took a face concealed approach also had experiences of being de-anonymized by means of identifying features visible in content (Fig. 2, ☹-C). Participant 3 outlined their experience:

“I’d have like, you know, pictures and stuff up, but they’d like find me from my tattoos. Or they’d look up, I don’t know how they got my Instagram or Snapchat.”

In order to manage the challenges posed by de-anonymization, models employed strategies both online and in their personal lives. While online, models who used a face-concealed approach adopted a strategy of vetting content for identifying features prior to public release (Fig. 2, ☹-C-i). A number of models also adopted strategies in their personal life to address the challenges surrounding de-anonymization and being outed. These strategies took separate approaches in dealing with individuals in one’s personal life. The first strategy involved maintaining secrecy around participation in OnlyFans (Fig. 2, ☹-B-ii, ☹-C-ii, ☹-B-ii, ☹-C-ii, ☹-D-ii). Participant 4 recalls compromising earnings in order to maintain secrecy:

“I get asked for video calls. And I say no a lot of the times because I live with my family. And if they’re around, like I can’t just be like locked in my room, because they’ll know and I just don’t want them to know. So, like I have to say no, and every time I say no, it just feels like ‘wow, I just lost a lot of money there.’”

This relates to Baym’s (2012) observation that music artists balanced fan-celebrity tensions through strategies which depended on their need to protect themselves and their loved ones while also protecting the interests of the fans. By contrast, the second strategy, entailed pre-emptively informing individuals in a model’s personal life of their participation on OnlyFans (Fig. 2, ☹-B-iii, ☹-C-iii, ☹-B-iii, ☹-C-iii, ☹-D-iii). This mirrors the findings of Hamilton et al. (2022) as a number of their participants also discussed OnlyFans work with their families and friends. Participant 5 recalled their experience of informing their employer:

“I spoke to them day one, I was like ‘just so you know’, and they were like ‘that’s fine, that’s great, just no cross promotion’ [...] that’s grand and I wasn’t planning on it anyway.”

Models spoke of other challenges posed by piracy, plagiarism, and identity theft. A portion of models experienced having their content reuploaded to other websites so fans could circumvent paywalls. Models also spoke of instances in which fans capture a model’s content and upload it to different accounts, earning money under their stolen identity (Fig. 2, E). This challenge relates to the danger of unauthorized recording reported by women involved in camming (Jones, 2016). Participant 4 recounted their experience:

“Another guy had sent me screenshots of another guy. He said that, like he paid this other guy for my pictures, because he thought it was me. But it wasn’t

obviously. So [...] anyone could be using my content, screenshotting, leaking my stuff, scamming other people using my videos, my pictures.”

When addressing these challenges, a number of models spoke of a strategy of utilizing legal recourse (Fig. 2, ☹-E-iv). Participant 3 described the recent legal changes in Ireland in this area:

“Ireland had a lot of new laws put in, like Coco’s law and all. [...] It’s just that basically anyone that’s soliciting like and distributing like someone else’s private photos without their permission, like you can get like prosecuted for it now.”

Participant 3 is referring to a recent piece of Irish legislation entitled the Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act (2020) also colloquially referred to as “Coco’s law”. The impetus to pass this law arose from the case of Nicole ‘Coco’ Fox, an Irish woman who took her own life in 2018 after a relentless campaign of online and in-person bullying. Coco’s law created two new offences which criminalize the non-consensual distribution of intimate images, the penalty of sharing said images with an intent to cause harm carries the penalty of an unlimited fine and/or 7 years imprisonment (Collins, 2023; Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act, 2020). Participant 4 also explained that OnlyFans, the company itself, can pursue legal action:

“If you take content from OnlyFans like there’s... they can take legal action, because technically now the content is theirs and not like mine.”

Models’ utilization of legal recourse mirrors the strategies reported by Jones (2016) which camming models used in leveraging the digital millennium copyright act to remove unauthorized resharing of their content. While models participating in this study appeared to be aware of the legislation in place that could be utilized in addressing the challenges of unauthorized resharing, the pursuit of said legal action in itself can carry risks of greater unwanted exposure. For example under Coco’s law, a victim is only granted anonymity in the event that an alleged perpetrator is prosecuted. Meaning that a victim of Non-Consensual Intimate Image Abuse puts themselves at risk of further exposure in the event that an alleged perpetrator is not prosecuted (Citizens Information Board, 2021).

Overall, models had two main approaches to negotiating exposure on OnlyFans—concealing their face (☹) or revealing it (☺). This decision involved trade-offs between anonymity and earnings potential (Fig. 2, ☹-A). Both approaches carried risks of being de-anonymized or “outed” by fans, either through identifying features like tattoos (Fig. 2, ☹-C) or having their identity intentionally exposed to people in their personal life (Fig. 2, ☹-C, ☹-C), which further exposed them to the stigma surrounding participation in OnlyFans (Fig. 2, ☹-D). To mitigate risks associated with de-anonymization or being ‘outed’, models vetted content for identifying details (Fig. 2, ☹-B-i ☹-C-i), maintained secrecy around their work (Fig. 2, ☹-B-ii, ☹-C-ii, ☹-B-ii, ☹-C-ii, ☹-D-ii), or pre-emptively informed individuals in their personal lives of their participation in OnlyFans (Fig. 2, ☹-B-iii, ☹-C-iii, ☹-B-iii, ☹-C-iii, ☹-D-iii). Models also faced challenges like piracy,

plagiarism and identity theft (Fig. 2E), where fans stole and redistributed their content. To combat this, models educated themselves on legal recourse (Fig. 2, ☹-E-iv). However, this legal recourse also risks further unwanted exposure during legal proceedings. The analysis highlighted the nuanced strategies models employed to retain anonymity and ownership over their identity and content.

Negotiating Impression Management

Impression management refers to processes an individual uses to control how they are perceived by others (Goffman, 1959; Leary, 2001). An individual has motivation to control the perceptions of others when an individual's public image is of relevance in obtaining specific goals (Leary, 2001). In the case of microcelebrities, such as OnlyFans models, Marwick and Boyd (2011) argue impression management is key to making one's presented self favourable to others in order to gain and retain fans. One of the initial challenges encountered by models in this domain was developing the role which they performed in a way that differentiated themselves from others (Fig. 3A). As attractiveness is subjective, what attracts one person may not necessarily attract another. Many of the models spoke of the various tastes that different fans have and the different ways in which the models would try to adapt their role to cater to these preferences. When faced with this challenge, the strategies models used varied in terms of the extent to which the presented self in performances was authentic to the personal self. Some of the models opted to take the strategy of being as authentic in performing their role as possible (Fig. 3A-i), Participant 1 summarized their belief:

“If you're gonna be more true to yourself, and like what you're actually like, people are gonna actually be more interested in that, than if you're just going to try and portray yourself like [...] every other model on Pornhub.”

A number of models spoke of a similar strategy which deviated slightly in terms of authenticity, by adopting a self-portrayal in their role which was exaggerated (Fig. 3A-ii). Participant 5 explained their approach:

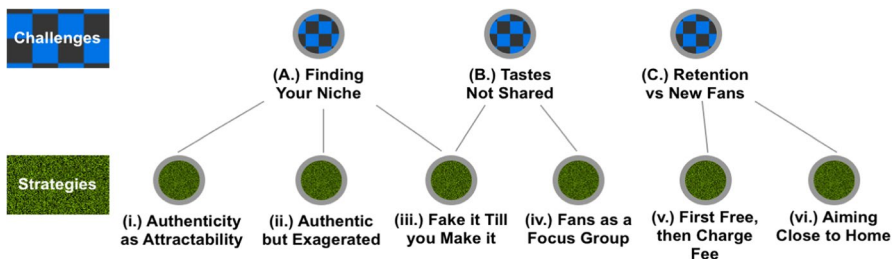


Fig. 3 Challenges and Strategies Observed Within the Problem Domain of Impression Management. Note. Blue Chequered Latin Alphabet = Challenges, Green Speckled Roman Numerals = Strategies

“Everything is dialled up to eleven on OnlyFans, in terms of, you know, what I’m feeling right now, what I’m doing right now. So, it’s a bit like any performance because that’s what it is, it’s a performance.”

Other models recalled how they initially adopted an alter ego when performing their role which compensated for their initial fears when coming onto OnlyFans (Fig. 3A-iii). Participant 3 recounted their experience using this strategy:

“Like when I started, I had to put on like this like fake persona of someone who was like really sexually confident and empowered. But I wasn’t at all, like it made me feel so vulnerable. When I started, like I was so scared to do anything.”

A challenge which arose for a segment of models was that they often did not share the same sexual preferences as the fans who they were trying to attract (Fig. 3B). An example of this challenge was encountered by Participant 7, who catered to a particular fetish known as Wet And Messy (WAM). WAM or *splashing* involves the arousal of an individual by the experience or fantasy of large quantities of a substance being poured or smeared onto the skin, body, face, or clothing (Gates, 2000). Participant 7 recalled getting comments on their videos asking for them to do WAM content:

“So, I started making videos on what they had said like, I guess pouring custard on yourself, so then other people started following in. Because I guess it’s not actually my fetish, I’m not really into it.”

When faced with this challenge, Participant 7 adopted a strategy of using their fans’ feedback as a means of guiding their performances (Fig. 3B-iv). By paying attention to the feedback given, Participant 7 was able to use their fans as a focus group which produced new ideas for content:

“I guess I’m just making videos based purely on what they’ve asked for to kind of bring other people in, [...] but I have found that has helped me quite a lot just to get to know what they like, what they don’t like, if I’m doing it right, if I’m not doing it right. So, they actually have been really helpful trying to guide me into the whole thing.”

A final challenge faced by a number of models was the balance between attracting new fans whilst retaining existing fans (Fig. 3C). Retaining fans means that models are able to earn a more stable living from their fanbase. Some of the models employed a strategy of using discounted trials in order to attract fans with the hopes of retaining them later (Fig. 3C-v). Participant 5 recalled their experience using this strategy:

“One of those months, I did a 30-day free trial, [...] And I got something like 200 subscribers, all of whom dropped off before the month ended.”

Other models adopted a different strategy, which aimed to attract fans in their area (Fig. 3C-vi). In the field of marketing, this is referred to as *proximity targeting*

(Allurwar et al., 2016). Participant 4 expanded on the belief underpinning this strategy:

“It’s easier to get a fanbase near you. Because they [the fans] always ask where you’re from. And even if they don’t do any meetings, they still like to have the idea that they could see you where they could potentially meet you.”

Models catered to this fantasy by aiming to attract fans who lived closer in proximity; however, this could potentially expose models to the danger of fans locating them in the physical world.

In closing, models faced challenges in differentiating themselves from other models on OnlyFans (Fig. 3A). Some models addressed this by aiming for authenticity (Fig. 3A-i), others exaggerated traits (Fig. 3A-ii), while some adopted an alter ego (Fig. 3A-iii). This strategy of using an alter ego or “faking it” was also used by some when catering to fan requests or fetishes that didn’t necessarily align with the model’s own preferences (Fig. 3B-iii), other approaches included using fan feedback to guide their content direction in response to this challenge (Fig. 3B-iv). A final area of challenge arose in the balancing of attracting new fans while retaining existing ones (Fig. 3C). Strategies to address this included offering discounted trials to attract new subscribers (Fig. 3C-v) or targeting fans in nearby locations to cater to proximity fantasies (Fig. 3C-vi), though this risked exposure. Throughout, impression management was crucial for cultivating an appealing persona to gain and maintain a fanbase. Models employed various strategies around authenticity, marketing strategies, and content tailoring. The analysis highlighted the complex identity work involved in models marketing idealized fantasy versions of themselves aligned with fan desires.

Negotiating Interaction

Interaction with fans is core to the experience of OnlyFans, with models sharing sexually suggestive media or messages with fans; this is often referred to as *sexting* (Chalfen, 2009). There were a variety of challenges which presented themselves to models within this domain. One of these challenges was having to deal with fans who used disrespectful, demeaning, or threatening language in interactions (Fig. 4A). Model 1 recounted their experience:

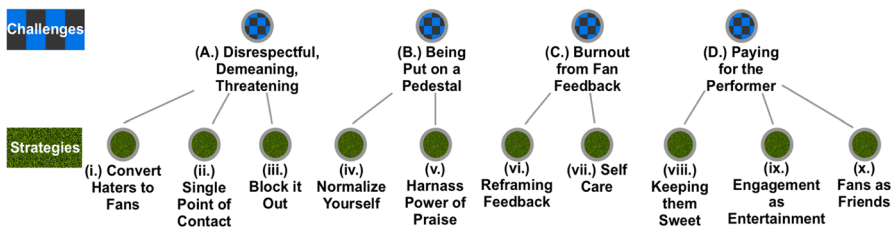


Fig. 4 Challenges and Strategies Observed Within the Problem Domain of Interaction. Note. Blue Checkered Latin Alphabet=Challenges, Green Speckled Roman Numerals=Strategies

“There would be ways people talk to you, because they assume that you’re going to put up with the way people talk to you in any way shape or form they want to.”

When adopting a strategy to deal with this, models used a variety of different approaches. One strategy involved reframing these negative interactions in relation to fanbase growth (Fig. 4A-i). Participant 4 discovered that following an influx of negative interactions, their subscriber count increased:

“You just kind of post whatever, and then they just come running, and then they come like hating. A lot of the hate turns into fans. So, all the people who are commenting like the meanest stuff are usually the ones who actually go and subscribe.”

Another strategy which various models adopted in dealing with this challenge, was to restrict fan interactions exclusively to OnlyFans (Fig. 4A-ii). In doing this, all fan interactions were subject to monitoring and moderation by OnlyFans staff. Participant 4 contrasted interactions they had with fans on OnlyFans with interactions on other social media platforms:

“They could say anything they want to, but because they’re paying for it, they usually do stay nice on OnlyFans, em they’re just usually not nice outside of OnlyFans.”

Finally, a selection of models who had experienced threatening language, adopted a strategy of both blocking not only the offending fans, but also blocking thoughts of these interactions from their head through attempted suppression and distraction (Fig. 4A-iii). Participant 4 explained their reasoning behind this:

“I just kind of ignore it mostly. Just kind of block them, and then don’t think about too much. Because then the more you think about it [...] I get worked up, and then more stressed about it.”

A number of models spoke of experiencing fans becoming infatuated with them and aggrandizing them with excessive positive emotions (Fig. 4B), similar to the excessively emotional fans described by music artists in Baym’s (2012) study. Models took diverging paths in addressing this challenge. Participant 5 described their strategy of normalizing themselves to the fan whilst also expressing gratitude (Fig. 4B-iv):

“If I talk to them, they’re like ‘Oh my God! You’re talking to me!’ and I’m like ‘whoa whoa whoa there, please don’t think I’m amazing. I’m not like, I’m so grateful for your support here.’”

Other models accepted and harnessed the positivity and attention from fans in order to experience benefits in areas such as confidence, self-esteem, and body image (Fig. 4B-v). This relates to Baym’s (2012) finding that the real-time fan feedback provided by social media can provide instantaneous social support to music artists; as well as the findings of Jones (2016) who described the affectual benefits derived from emotionally intimate encounters with fans reported by camming performers. Participant 1 recalled the benefits they had experienced:

“You’re just gonna hear back such nice things about yourself. And it’s kind of hard not to take them on board. So, I do feel so much more improved in my self-confidence, and my sexuality since I started.”

A number of models described feeling burnout from dealing with challenging fan feedback (Fig. 4C). A strategy used by one of the models to address this was to reframe said feedback from being a personal attack to more of a critique (Fig. 4C-vi). Participant 5 elucidated their approach:

“Because you are selling a product, you’re going to be met with a different response. [...] Now I’m selling an image, and people will go ‘you’re charging too much’ [...] and then the first thing you feel is that ‘oh my God, am I not worth this?’ And it’s not that at all, it’s never ever ever personal, even though it feels so personal.”

Other models opted to take an approach of self-care and fostering an empowered mindset around dealing with fan interaction. This strategy involved adopting an attitude of being one’s own boss and setting one’s own expectations of oneself rather than attempting to live up to the expectations of one’s fans (Fig. 4C-vii).

A final area of challenge came from fans’ expectation that they were paying for access to the model, rather than just the model’s content (Fig. 4D). As interaction is a core factor of the OnlyFans experience, this can heighten the expectation of intimacy between models and their fans. Participant 3 explained the value of personal interaction to the fan:

“They kind of want especially things like live videos and like live texting. Em, I think they just really want something like that. So, they feel it’s more personal, and more connective.”

The fans’ desire for more synchronized interaction through live videos and live chat aligns with research findings in the study of camming by Jones (2016), who found that the synchronized interactions allowed audience members to have a genuine experience, one perceived as having value because it was experienced as an authentic interaction with a “real” woman.

However, as models have multiple fans, they can find it challenging to perform their role to a sufficient degree which satisfied all of their fans’ constant desire for intimacy. Participant 2 explained this challenge:

“These clients, they want to talk to you 100% of the time. They want to know what you’re doing morning, noon, and night. It’s not like a nine to five.”

This challenge relates to the relational labour described by Baym (2015) in which audiences increasingly expect celebrity figures to engage and foster relationships with them. A strategy adopted by Participant 4 to address this challenge, was to try to keep sending out regular messages to all fans, and hosting competitions to release free content (Fig. 4D-viii). Other participants responded to this challenge of fans’ constant desire for intimacy, by reciprocating some of that intimacy. Participant 2 took an approach of reciprocating sexual intimacy with their fans by adopting a

strategy of engaging in sexting with fans as a source of personal fun and entertainment (Fig. 4D-ix):

“I’m not doing it really for the money. I’m doing it to be able to sext people not on Tinder. [...] I love sexting, but I don’t so much like sexting and then being like, the repercussions of having to like carry out things in person.”

A similar strategy adopted by Participant 3, was to reciprocate a level of emotional intimacy with their fans by viewing some of their more trusted fans as friends (Fig. 4D-x):

“There’s certain people you do connect with because they genuinely just care about you, regardless of if it’s in a sexual way or just a friendship way [...] it’s just like “this is my friend” you know what I mean?”

This supports arguments made by Baym (2012) that intimacy between fan and celebrity exists on a continuum ranging from impersonal fans all the way to viewing fans as friends.

In summation, models faced challenges in dealing with fans who used disrespectful, demeaning or threatening language (Fig. 4A). Strategies utilized in response to this included reframing negativity as potential fanbase growth (Fig. 4A-i), restricting interactions to the moderated OnlyFans platform (Fig. 4A-ii), and blocking/suppressing hurtful comments (Fig. 4A-iii). Another challenge faced by models was fans becoming overly infatuated (Fig. 4B). In response to this, some models normalized themselves to fans while expressing gratitude (Fig. 4B-iv), while others embraced the positivity for boosts in areas such as confidence, self-esteem and body image (Fig. 4B-v). Models also experienced burnout from challenging fan feedback (Fig. 4C), addressing this by reframing criticism as product feedback rather than personal attacks (Fig. 4C-vi), or through bolstering self-care and adopting empowered mindsets (Fig. 4C-vii). A key challenge faced by Models was meeting fans’ expectations of constant access and intimacy beyond just content (Fig. 4D). Strategies adopted in response included sending regular messages and hosting competitions (Fig. 4D-viii), deriving enjoyment from the fun of sexting (Fig. 4D-ix), and fostering emotional connections by viewing some fans as friends (Fig. 4D-x). The analysis highlighted the relational labour and emotional toll involved in providing fantasy experiences while balancing the level of intimacy reciprocated to fans.

Discussion

Reflecting back on the stated research questions, this study set out to explore what challenges OnlyFans models faced in interacting with fans, and the strategies used to negotiate these challenges. Models negotiated challenges in a range of different problem domains. Within the domain of boundaries, models negotiated challenges of fans either lacking awareness or respect of models’ boundaries by clarifying boundaries and rejecting fans’ advances in a fashion which ranged from gentle to firm. Within the domain of exposure, models negotiated challenges of having their

identity revealed and their content recirculated by utilizing legal recourse, adopting strategies by vetting content online and by maintaining secrecy or pre-emptively informing individuals in their personal life of their participation in OnlyFans. Within the domain of impression management, models negotiated challenges in areas such as finding, catering to, and retaining an audience by utilizing strategies such as portraying varying levels of authenticity in performances, incorporating fan feedback and adopting differing marketing strategies (limited time offers, proximity targeting). Finally, within the domain of interaction, models negotiated negative fan interactions by reframing, distraction, selfcare, and isolating interactions to OnlyFans only. Models negotiated excessive fan adoration in interactions by either normalizing themselves to fans or harnessing fan positivity to enhance wellbeing. Models negotiated fans' desire for intimacy in interactions by regularly keeping in communication with them, or by reciprocating some of that intimacy.

In this section, we will discuss how the confusing nature of roles on OnlyFans and the sustainment of fan fantasy can contribute to some of the challenges which were observed by OnlyFans models. We will then discuss how this confusion surrounding roles and fan fantasy also occurs between other celebrity figures and the fandoms surrounding them. Following this, we will discuss the implications of these findings for a wide variety of individuals including those directly involved in or considering work on OnlyFans, individuals at the centre of fandoms, as well as researchers and health care workers involved in the study and care of individuals at the centre of fandoms. Finally, the limitations of this study and recommendations for future studies will be outlined.

Models adopt roles when performing on OnlyFans. This role is developed through impression management and aims to appease the fantasy of the fan, often involving performing as someone who is emotionally available and sexually attainable in their interactions with fans. In many cases, the fan's only exposure to a model is through the role which the model performs. This can create confusion and *blur* the line between reality and fantasy for fans which can result in boundary violations. There is a lack of clarity regarding roles played by the model from the fans' perspective. However, there is equally a lack of clarity from the models' perspective; a number of models in this study reported a *blurring* of roles for fans, with some models seeing fans more as friends. In conclusion, it could be argued that neither party in this fan-model relationship fully understands how to navigate the complexity of this dynamic. Fans are interacting with someone engaged in performance, often with no clarification that the intimacy expressed in these performances may not be genuine. Simultaneously, models have been given no guidance on how to best manage fan confusion with regards to the distinction between the fantasy and reality. Models may feel dissuaded from clarifying this distinction, as it could shatter the fantasy for the fan and may lead to them unsubscribing. However, sustaining this confusion between fantasy and reality for fans can lead to problematic fan-model relationships and interactions.

This is also true for other celebrity figures, micro and mainstream celebrities alike. For example, many South Korean Popstars (K-Pop Stars) are forbidden from being in relationships as part of their contracts. This is often done in efforts to sustain fan fantasy that the K-Pop star is romantically accessible to

fans (Griffiths, 2018). However, this has resulted in some problematic fan-celebrity relationships, as evidenced through what are known as *Sasaeng fans*, who are defined by their obsessive and extreme behaviour towards K-Pop stars. Some of this behaviour includes reported instances of stalking and disturbing fan letters written in the blood of the fan (Iwicka, 2018).

The findings of the present research study have implications for a broad range of individuals, not just those directly involved with OnlyFans and related platforms. The primary implication presented by the findings of this study is that preserving fan fantasy may lead to larger earnings for individuals at the centre of fandoms, but often at the cost of fostering confusing and problematic fan-celebrity relationships. These findings could help in guiding individuals who are considering becoming, or are already at, the centre of fandoms, and who find themselves lost in navigating the complexity of the roles played in fan-celebrity relationships. Especially now that the line between traditional celebrity and microcelebrity/influencer has become increasingly blurred, with some mainstream celebrities such as pop artist Cardi B and actress Bella Thorne now uploading content to OnlyFans (Croley, 2021; Hamilton et al., 2022).

This research contributes to an ongoing public health dialogue surrounding the participation in and consumption of media and its effect on well-being. Dissemination of these findings could lead to a better understanding of the lived experiences of those at the centre of fandoms. For healthcare professionals, particularly those specializing in mental health, these findings emphasize the need for an enhanced understanding of the unique stressors and dynamics associated with being at the centre of fandoms, especially in digital spaces like OnlyFans. By gaining insight into the blurred lines between fantasy and reality in these environments, they may be better equipped to assist their clients in navigating associated challenges.

The present research findings also contribute to research of online human interactions. Despite these online interactions taking place in a relatively niche area of the internet, the same principles and processes observed in other online interactions still apply. For example, concepts which are common to other areas of online interaction, such as impression management and enforcing boundaries, are also at play in interactions on OnlyFans. The negotiation of these processes is more complex in the context of OnlyFans, due to the sexually and often emotionally charged nature of these interactions.

A limitation of this research study is that it examines a dyadic interaction from the perspective of only one of the parties involved. Any information about the experiences or perspective of the fans was derived from a secondary source, the models. Further study in this area of interactive sexual experiences on OnlyFans should aim to get a better understanding of the factors at play in this fan-model relationship. In order to do this, researchers must speak to both parties involved. By getting both perspectives, clearer conclusions as to how to foster healthier and less problematic relationships between these two groups can be drawn.

Appendix 1: Information Statement

Information Statement



Thank you for considering participating in this research project. The purpose of this document is to explain to you what the work is about and what your participation would involve, so as to enable you to make an informed choice.

The current study aims to talk to models who use OnlyFans as a platform to provide revenue, this can include glamour modelling. Glamour modelling or photography is a genre of photography involving individuals posing in erotic poses (fully clothed, partially clothed or nude) which can be sold for individual use or distributed commercially.

However in order to narrow the scope of this research solely to those engaged in modelling, we will not be able to talk to individuals who have engaged in digital sex work on OnlyFans. We would define digital sex work as any recording of a performed sexual act (e.g. masturbation) which has been digitally distributed in exchange for monetary compensation.

The purpose of this study is understand how models who advertise their service on OnlyFans negotiate the benefits and risks associated with fostering a relationship with fans. We are looking to speak with people with varying levels of expertise in the management of relationships with fans on OnlyFans. We see you as collaborators in this research as you may have prior experience in managing these relationships with fans, and as such, we are trying to understand your strategies in managing fan relationships and how these strategies have developed over time. We have no intention to psychologically evaluate you or your fanbase.

There have been reports of some models experiencing harassment, doxxing and threats from fans on the platform (Croxford, 2021). If you have experienced anything similar, including traumatic or distress negative experiences during your time on OnlyFans, we do not recommend participating in the current study. Due to this research being carried out for the attainment of a Masters of Arts in Applied Psychology (Mental Health), the person interviewing you will not be qualified in counselling or psychotherapy; therefore this may not be an appropriate environment for disclosures which are likely to be distressing in nature.

Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to take part in a digital one-to-one interview with a member of the research team. This interview will be audio recorded, and is expected to take 30–45 min to complete.

In order to ensure that you are comfortable participating in the current research study, we will now inform you of the proposed topics of discussion for the interview. This is done in order to give you as much information as possible when deciding

whether you would like to proceed with participation. Participants can consent to some topics of discussion and choose to move past areas of discussion which they do not wish to discuss while still remaining a participant in the research study.

1. *Opening*—“Tell us about your last week on OnlyFans”

Nice opening question that gets a conversation flowing. Gives insight into what a typical work week on OnlyFans looks like.

2. *Growth on the platform*—“How Do You Build a Fandom Around Yourself on OnlyFans?”

“How long did it take to build your fandom to the size that it is now?”

“Were there any key events or milestones in the growth of your fandom?”

3. *Impression management*—“Do you have professional identity and a personal identity?”

“Do you feel that the person that you portray to fans is close to your personal identity?”

“Do you have a persona for OnlyFans or do you try to portray an authentic version of yourself?”

4. *Benefits of the Job*—“Can you think of any particular moments in your work on OnlyFans where you experienced some form of benefit or made you think ‘I really love doing this?’”

Probes: Can you tell me more about that?

Can you remember what you were thinking at the time?

5. *Dangers of the Job*—“Were there ever any moments in your work on OnlyFans where you felt uncomfortable or threatened? Can you give me an example?”

Probes: Can you tell me more about that?

Can you remember what you were thinking at the time?

Was there any outcome that you were worried could happen?

6. *Perception of OnlyFans as a Platform*—“In your opinion, does OnlyFans do enough to protect its content creators?”

“Is there anything you think would be helpful in the improvement of OnlyFans as a platform?”

“Do you think there is anything about OnlyFans as website or application which influences how users interact through it?”

7. *Strategies to Mitigate Dangers/Enhance Benefits*—This is more of a natural follow on question from Questions 2 and 3. After getting some examples of beneficial experiences and/or negative experiences, the interviewer can probe further into any strategies that the model used in that example to increase the likelihood of beneficial experiences while reducing the likelihood of negative experiences occurring.

Examples:

“So after having experienced that, was there anything you did to reduce the chances of that happening again?”

“You stated that those experiences are beneficial for you, is there anything that you have done to make it possible for you to have more of those kinds of experiences in the future?”

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. There is no obligation to participate, and should you choose to do so you can refuse to answer specific questions, or decide to withdraw from the interview at any time. Participants can consent to

some topics of discussion and elect to move past areas of discussion which they do not wish to discuss while still remaining a participant in the research study. Once the interview has been concluded, you can choose to withdraw your details at any time in the 2 weeks after the interview has taken place.

The interview audio recording and full interview transcripts will be available only to Luke Tynan and the study supervisor, Conor Linehan. Certain quotations from the transcripts will be included in a final research article, which should it be published, will exist indefinitely. However, these quotes will be de-identified will be attributed to a pseudonym rather than to your personal identity. The only exception is where information is disclosed which indicates that there is a serious risk to you or to others.

Once the interview is completed, the recording will immediately be transferred from an encrypted laptop to Microsoft OneDrive's encrypted cloud servers, before being wiped from encrypted laptop device. The interview will then be transcribed by the researcher, and all identifying information will be removed. Following the transcription of the interviewer, Luke Tynan, the current study's primary researcher, will send you a copy of the transcript and ask you to confirm that you are indeed happy that what has been transcribed is correct and was indeed what you said during the interview. Once this is done, the audio-recording will also be deleted and only the anonymized transcript will remain. This will be stored on the University College Cork (UCC) OneDrive system and subsequently on the UCC server. The data will be stored for a minimum of 10 years.

As the current study employs principles of continuous consent, you will be asked to reconfirm that you consent to participation at various points throughout the interview, and indeed in the time period immediately following the interview, such as when confirming the contents of the transcripts etc.

The information you provide may contribute to research publications and/or conference presentations. You will be contributing to research that may help inform others on positive practices with relation to maintaining healthy relationships with fans. The data collected within this interview will be contributing towards a masters thesis in Applied Psychology (Mental Health).

We do not intend to cause any distress to participants. Some of the topics covered in the interview, however, are of a sensitive and personal nature. Should you wish to do so, you can choose not to answer questions, or to bring the interview to an end at any time. At the end of the procedure, I will discuss with you how you found the experience and how you are feeling. Should you experience distress arising from the interview, the contact details for support services provided below may be of assistance.

HSE Mental Health Services

Wide range of community and hospital based mental health services in Ireland.

T: 1800 700 700

W: <https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/4/mental-health-services/>

This study has obtained ethical approval from the UCC School of Applied Psychology Ethics Committee.

If you have a concern about how we have handled your personal data, you are entitled to this raise this with the Data Protection Commission.

<https://www.dataprotection.ie/>

If you have any queries about this research, you can contact me at conor.linehan@ucc.ie.

If you agree to take part in this study, please sign the consent form overleaf.

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Author Contributions LT, the first author, conceived the initial research idea, designed the study, and took the lead in conducting the interviews as well as performing the reflective thematic analysis. He was also responsible for writing the initial draft of the manuscript, encompassing all major sections. CL, the second author and supervisor, provided guidance throughout the research process, including critical review, commentary, and revision of the manuscript. His oversight and leadership responsibilities extended to planning and execution, as well as mentorship beyond the core research activities. Both authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest We, Luke Tynan and Conor Linehan declare that neither we nor any member of either of our immediate families have a significant financial arrangement or affiliation with any product or services used or discussed in this psychology article. Additionally, there exists no potential bias against another product or service. For the purpose of this statement, 'immediate families' is defined as partners, spouses, parents, children, and siblings.

Ethics Approval This study was performed in line with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Approval was granted by the University College Cork School of Applied Psychology Research Ethics Committee (2022, March 3/EA-MMH02102022716).

Consent to Participate Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. Participants were informed of the study's purpose and nature in writing and agreed to have their interviews audio-recorded. They were made aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without repercussions, and that they could withdraw permission to use their data within 2 weeks after the interview.

Consent to Publish The authors affirm that informed consent for the publication of disguised extracts from interviews was obtained from the participants who ticked the corresponding box in the consent form. Anonymity has been ensured by disguising participants' identities in the manuscript.

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