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Only-Fans of Empowerment: Feminist Theories of Simulated Liberation

As a billion-dollar enterprise aggressively targeting women, OnlyFans is no passive intermediary, but an active agent in perpetuating exploitation. Rather than disrupting oppressive systems, the platform's content naturalizes them while reframing compliance as empowerment or what I term "simulated liberation." OnlyFans performers are not especially liberated from oppression. This subscription-based model, where performers select pricing, content parameters, and interaction boundaries, presents an illusion of radical freedom while remaining circumscribed by patriarchal desire and surveillance. Monetization on the site is fundamentally structured by male demands. This phenomenon transcends class boundaries. Digital performers are positioned as "high-class" sex-workers exercising self-expression, financial control, and independence—ostensibly with greater agency than their "low-class" counterparts in traditional sex work, OnlyFans exemplifies a cultural moment where feminine exploitation is not merely tolerated but aestheticized and marketed back to women as empowerment. Through integrating Andrea Dworkin's critique of sexual violence, Laura Mulvey's psychoanalytic male-gaze, and Michel Foucault's work on consent, this essay explores how feminine bodies remain surveilled, consumed, and circulated within patriarchal frameworks despite the veneer of autonomy. This system secures compliance not through coercion but through what Antonio Gramsci identifies as hegemonic processes, normalized practices obtaining consent to dominant ideologies without requiring force.

Women on OnlyFans perform under a system mirroring traditional structures of male spectatorship. Film theorist Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze, "Visual pleasure in narrative cinema," describes how visual media encodes women as passive. Under her analysis, cinematic pleasures are predicated on "scopophilia": men enjoy looking at women, who are presented as passive images to be consumed. She notes that in \ Hollywood cinema, pleasure is divided "between active/male and passive/female," with the woman on screen given "to-be-looked-at-ness" so that she can signify male desire.(Mulvey 1958). The woman on screen is "a cipher, a zero-point, a locus for others. She is an image, and therefore she is nothing." Media consumption shapes subjectivity. Women learn to see themselves (and be seen) as objects to be looked at. In the digital realm, social media, and platform content invite viewers into a voyeuristic relationship with female creators. The platform's viewership is 87% male (Litam et al.). Mulvey's insight implies that no matter who is behind the camera, the structure of desire on OnlyFans echos the traditional cinematic dynamic.

This is simulated liberation: the appearance of subversion that stabilizes the status quo. OnlyFans invites women to "take control" of their sexual labor, but such control is exercised on terms set by a patriarchal marketplace. Any gains in income or autonomy are framed as personal triumphs, yet they occur within the longstanding pattern that women's value derives from their desirability to men.

Power often operates invisibly. People regulate themselves according to norms they perceive as natural or aspirational, thereby sometimes perpetuating structures that disadvantage them. Antonio Gramsci In "The Formation of Intellectuals," introduced the notion of cultural hegemony, describing how ruling classes maintain power not only

through force but through the voluntary consent of subordinate groups. In this model, the capitalist state comprises two overlapping spheres: political society (the coercive apparatus) and civil society (the realm of culture, media, and ideas). It is in civil society, and everyday norms, that the dominant class manufactures consent, making its worldview seem “common sense” (933). Ruling ideas pervade institutions so thoroughly that people internalize them and willingly uphold the status quo. Women’s participation in the platform can be seen as “consent” manufactured by ideology rather than overt coercion (935). The discourse of empowerment, autonomy, and entrepreneurship (borrowed from neoliberal feminism) function as hegemonic ideas that align women’s interests with patriarchal capitalism. That is, if women believe OnlyFans is liberating, they may actively consent to its rules, inadvertently reinforcing the very system that constrains them.

The Independent columnist Olivia Petter writes, OnlyFans relies on the “fundamental ideology” that “women have bodies that men will pay money to objectify,” a system of exploitation and degradation that has endured for millennia. Even when women profit from the platform, they are “succumbing” to patriarchal demands, not subverting them. Feminist theorist Andrea Dworkin argued that under patriarchy, sexuality is saturated with power and violence. In her book “Intercourse” she describes pornography and prostitution are not mere entertainment or commerce, but “rules of sexual abuse” codified in media and culture. She insisted that sex work and porn normalize women’s sexual dehumanization, encouraging men to view women not as autonomous beings but as “passive objects of sexual gratification.” In Dworkin’s view, men’s power over women is embodied in the way female bodies are used and

consumed; even when women "consent," the basic dynamic of male possession remains.

Although empowerment narratives about digital sex work are common, it operates as a disciplinary system where women regulate their own behavior or work to align with market expectations. Michel Foucault illustrates in "Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison" the Panopticon – an architectural model of constant surveillance – as a metaphor for modern power. Here, individuals internalize the gaze of unseen watchers and regulate their behavior. Foucault saw "It is a normalizing gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish. It establishes over individuals a visibility through which one differentiates them and judges them" (184). Visibility thus becomes a trap, as subjects anticipate judgment and conform without external coercion this productive power, power that subjugates by making people complicit in their own control.

Creators know their content is watched, rated, and easily shared; they may self-censor and tailor performances to satisfy viewers and platform norms. OnlyFans' digital architecture (with analytics, subscriber feedback, and community standards) functions like a panoptic system: women's bodies are under constant watch. According to Foucault's logic, this fosters self-regulation. The knowledge that any deviation might lead to stigma or de-platforming pressures OnlyFans creators to conform to marketable (often patriarchally dictated) standards of sexuality and beauty. OnlyFans explicitly market themselves as liberating: creators highlight its "autonomy" – you can "set your own prices, choose your own boundaries, [and] keep a majority of your earnings," the narrative goes. In their public statements, celebrity joiners like Kate Nash and Lily Allen

emphasize the control and profit they gain on OnlyFans, implying a feminist victory over traditional models of labor.

This rhetoric feeds a post-feminist trope: any use of sexuality for self-advancement is framed as inherently empowering. This is a simulated empowerment. Paid sexuality under patriarchy remains tied to male domination. For example, one study notes that while many OnlyFans creators enjoy greater safety compared to street sex work, they also face “new dangers like online harassment, capping, doxxing, and job dismissal” (Stegeman et al.) Research on online sex work finds that even self-styled empowerment often coexists with pressures and dangers. In practice, many creators also report tailoring their content to “the algorithm” and paying customer’s demand. This range of choices is thus enclosed in a box. The audience and platform policy become invisible wardens. Drawing from Foucault, we see that creator “force themselves to be ‘normal’” – i.e., to perform the type of sexual content that men on OnlyFans expect. This dynamic shows that nominal “choice” is exercised within a context of discipline: only certain expressions of sexuality are rewarded. The autonomy to set one’s price or say no to a subscriber exists but must align with consumer demand. Thus, what appears as empowerment is patrolled by market forces and panoptic surveillance, constraining the very freedom it promises.

OnlyFans exemplifies how digital capitalism co-opts feminist rhetoric. Advertisements and self-justifications emphasize autonomy, empowerment, and sexual positivity. This mirrors broader trends in post-feminist or neoliberal feminism, where feminist concepts of choice and empowerment are deployed at the level of the individual." Luoxuan Zhang's study of OnlyFans discourse finds that the post-feminist

neoliberal narrative on the platform “champions free choice and personal responsibility,” yet hides enduring inequalities. The vocabulary of feminism is thus appropriated: women are told they are liberating themselves by monetizing their bodies, but this framing obscures the capitalist exploitation underneath. This appropriation has practical effects. Creators and fans alike often describe OnlyFans as a space of “empowerment” and agency. However, the empowerment narrative silences critique.

Under neoliberalism women are taught to see personal advancement as their responsibility. The platform fits neatly into this paradigm: it promises entrepreneurial self-improvement. Women who join are often lauded as clever businesswomen. Thus, a patriarchal system secures consent: women come to see OnlyFans as an acceptable path because it is framed as empowerment. Cultural institutions (in this case, social media and celebrity culture) produce a sense that OnlyFans is part of the “normal” way for ambitious women to succeed. Subscribers act as an extended male gaze, they pay to watch, imagine, and desire. The platform literally monetizes the act of male looking. Female creators perform continuously for this gaze, and their visibility is calculated (e.g., follower counts, pay-per-view content). This digital gaze is amplifying traditional objectification: women become brands that can be viewed on demand. Laura Mulvey’s notion that the woman is “to-be-looked-at-ness” is uncannily accurate here, on OnlyFans, creators’ entire business hinges on remaining visible and desirable to men.

Yet this visibility is also a form of surveillance. Every photo, every message, and every subscription are tracked. Being constantly visible breeds conformity. As a result, women on OnlyFans may begin to limit their agency to safer choices that align with the male gaze. This mirrors Gramsci’s idea of self-discipline under hegemony: women are

“obedient” performers because they have internalized what kind of sexuality is profitable and acceptable. Moreover, the distributed nature of OnlyFans content means that images of female bodies are constantly circulated beyond the platform. Leaks, screenshots, and illegal re-postings (capping) are rampant (Luoxuan.) Consent is consistently violated for many. Once a woman’s image is on OnlyFans, it can be copied and shared globally, violating her boundaries and control. Masculine power is exerted through constant visibility and feedback, making bodies both objects of desire and targets of control. situated within broader historical patterns of patriarchal adaptation to recent technologies. Just as older media (print, film, internet) have been co-opted by patriarchal interests, so too has social media become a space for reinforcing gendered power. The site is part of a continuum: the commercial exploitation of female sexuality simply found a new, techno-enabled forum. OnlyFans demonstrates how patriarchal capitalism adapts feminist language for its own ends. By branding sexual commerce as empowerment, it engenders a simulated liberation: Participation on the platform is consensual – in that it is entered by choice – but this consent is manufactured by ideology. The modern digital economy requires that even sex work be framed as entrepreneurial freedom, lest outright repression face backlash.

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