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INTERDEPENDENT PLATFORMS: ONLYFANS AS NSFW SOCIAL MEDIA LAYER

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On content subscription platform OnlyFans, the search function is limited. Once an account is created, there are few directions about where to go. The assumption is that the user has arrived at OnlyFans from another social media platform: that they already know who they want to find. This means that OnlyFans functions, not as an independent platform, but one deeply conscious of a social media ecosystem in which people have accounts on multiple platforms.

People have multiple stories about themselves, José van Dijck argued in 2013 when researching the differences between LinkedIn and Facebook profiles. Presenting the self on two different platforms allowed for context-specific performances of the “social” (Facebook) and “professional” (LinkedIn) selves. Since 2013, more research on accounts and platforms (including Davis 2014; van der Nagel 2018; Vickery 2015) has demonstrated that compartmentalising identities by using a variety of social media platforms – sometimes even multiple accounts on the same platform – is a powerful strategy to combat what danah boyd (2014) calls “context collapse”.

OnlyFans’ tagline, “make your influence pay”, deliberately speaks to a broader culture of social media influencers as internet celebrities who have monetised their fame (Abidin 2018). In a post to the OnlyFans blog by staffer Steve, he implores influencers to sign up. “You create great content anyway and your fans love it, so why deny yourself the chance to get paid for it?” (Steve 2018). While the platform’s corporate communication emphasises a broad range of content creators, the dominant perception, or the *platform imaginary*, of OnlyFans is a platform for women creating adult material.

In researching OnlyFans’ platform imaginary, I draw on Karin van Es and Thomas Poell (2020)’s work, which in turn is built on Eden Litt and Eszter Hargittai’s (2016) concept of the *imagined audience*, a mental guide for what people post on social media. For van Es and Poell (2020), a platform imaginary is how people understand, and organise themselves in relation to, platforms. These imaginaries carry underlying norms and ideologies which inform platform experiences. For example, Snapchat began as “for”

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sending nudes, but has been reframed around notions of spontaneity and candid photos (Tiidenberg & van der Nagel 2020: 57).

To investigate the way that OnlyFans does not stand alone as an independent platform, but relies on established public presences on other platforms, I have taken a feminist content analysis approach (Leavy 2007) to critically analyse memes as media texts that reflect and create social reality. I gathered 200 memes about OnlyFans and found they most often inferred an expectation that OnlyFans content would be posted by heterosexual women, and include adult, or Not Safe For Work (NSFW) content.

One meme sets out the platform imaginary most often drawn on by jokes and cultural references about OnlyFans: a three-panel image of a white man closing his eyes in disbelief, a popular reaction image to express incredulity known as Blinking White Guy. The caption reads: “me when I sign up for OnlyFans and see pictures of naked girls instead of ceiling fans” (Cheezburger 2020), a pun on “fans” as well as ironically implying the expected content: pictures of naked girls. Another meme features a photo of a young woman sitting on her couch, eyes wide in an expression of awkward surprise, as her cat bends over in front of her laptop, inadvertently exposing its anus to the camera. It’s captioned, “when you just wanna do your zoom call but your cat wants to start an onlyfans” (@ok_girlfriend 2020). As evoked in the meme, “starting an onlyfans” means beginning to sell access to specifically NSFW content. The cat’s exposed genitals stand in for what paying audiences can expect to see from content creators to whom they subscribe.

Platform imaginaries shape what social actors think about, and do, in relation to a platform (van Es & Poell 2020). They are useful because, as Bucher (2018) put it, they give us ways of thinking about what these imaginations make possible. For OnlyFans to suggest, through its corporate communication, that it is for influencers of all kinds implies two main strategies for this emerging platform. First, that its owners would like OnlyFans to be known as a broader platform than just for NSFW content creators – despite the platform imaginary that sets up an expectation of seeing nude and lewd content. Second, that OnlyFans is not a “home base” or core platform from which to create a profile and make connections. OnlyFans does not act as an independent social media platform, but as one of many layers.

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