

# PENNSYLVANIA SOCIOLOGICAL SOCIETY GRADUATE STUDENT PAPER

## AWAREE: Situational Sexuality and Straight Men's Eroticism on OnlyFans

Tyler Burgese

### ABSTRACT

This research investigates identity presentation and management on OnlyFans, a subscription-based platform where users post explicit content for their audiences. In nine qualitative interviews with a convenience sample of straight male creators on this platform, I asked questions about their motivations to perform for gay male audiences on OnlyFans and how they construct and maintain their straight identities while performing this work. These conversations reveal that the online context of OnlyFans lends a certain elasticity to straight identities that waives the requirement for traditionally rigid categories. Thus, I argue that straight men perform eroticism on OnlyFans for gay male audiences because the financial incentive to do so and the digital distance that the platform affords both outweigh the potential stigma that this transgression of identity categories would typically create. This work extends the literature on situational homosexuality and gay-for-pay pornography by identifying a new platform for online sex work with fewer barriers to entry and more flexible identity allowances.

**KEYWORDS:** Sexualities; situational homosexuality; gay-for-pay; OnlyFans; erotic labor; online sex work

Notable changes in the sex work industry have recently occurred as a result of the internet. Traditional in-person venues for sex work like outdoor strolls, print advertisements, brothels, and agencies have declined in use as this work and its facilitation has shifted online. Beyond convenience, online sites offer enhanced safety features in comparison to in-person venues, including the ability to screen clients in advance, increased accessibility and autonomy, reduced risk of violence, and, of course, more lucrative returns (McLean 2015; Argento et al. 2018).

To be clear, sociologists have been studying sex work for a very long time (Sanders, O'Neill, and Pitcher 2018 offer an excellent overview), though many scholars have acknowledged the shortcomings of this tradition, including a tendency toward overgeneralization, essentialism, and moral condemnation (Weitzer 2000). Another common criticism of early studies of sex work is that they have glaringly lacked the inclusion of specific populations, including the existence and complexity of male sex workers, who have participated in sex work since its inception, despite the majority of visible sex workers historically being

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women (Weitzer, 2009). Studies of online sex work have worked to improve on these past shortcomings (Jones 2015).

OnlyFans is a UK-based online platform that hosts paid subscriptions to exclusive content provided by individual creators and has become one of many common venues for explicit videos and images of male sex workers. Other platforms include Pornhub, Patreon, ManyVids, JustForFans, and 4myfans, and it is not uncommon for individual creators to have a presence on several of these sites at the same time. OnlyFans is a noteworthy juggernaut among this crowd, however, because of its rapid rise in popularity during 2020 and prominent place in the public eye (Bernstein 2019; Donnelly 2021).

By studying the nature of male sex work on OnlyFans, this work heeds several calls in the sociological study of sex work, such as a focus on male sex workers (Weitzer 2009) and the context of “individualized erotic labor” that is now commonplace thanks to the internet (Jones 2015). To do so, I draw on a subset of a larger sample of masculine-presenting OnlyFans creators to ask questions about straight men’s motivations to perform for gay male audiences on OnlyFans and how they construct and maintain their straight identities while performing this work. In answering these questions, I will uncover a narrative about the boundaries of straight male sexuality and the influence of money on their fluctuation. In order to do this work, these men must internally manage their thinking about the discrepancy between their own identities and those of their audiences, in addition to communicating that identity clearly to these audiences.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### OnlyFans as a platform

At the time of this writing, OnlyFans has 170 million users, with about 500,000 people joining daily (Wise 2022). While this company painstakingly presents a polished, family-friendly image of itself by strategically marketing its creators as fitness gurus, songwriters, and other creative types, the reality is that this platform is dominated by, and most profitable for, sex workers posting pornography; about 70% of OnlyFans content was classified as NSFW (not safe for work) in the last quarter of 2020 (van der Nagel 2021; Wise 2022). Content on OnlyFans spans a wide range of classifications from the most conventional, normative pornography to highly niche fetishes.

Two of the main traits that set OnlyFans apart from traditional online pornography are its accessibility and individuality. The only requirements for creating an account are internet access and a bank account, so the typical gatekeepers of the pornography industry like agents, auditions, and directors are no longer an issue. The online sex work industry’s combination of seasoned professionals and passionate amateurs gives anyone a shot at creating explicit content for an audience in what Feona Attwood terms “pro-amateur production” (2010). Because each creator is in charge of their own content, they are able to retain complete control over what they post and don’t post (though they only see 80% of their total earnings).

The coronavirus pandemic is heavily associated with the explosive popularity of this site, as many creators made accounts after losing some or all of their employment due to mandated lockdowns and social distancing protocols. Prior to this, OnlyFans was inhabited almost exclusively by people who were already a part of the sex work industry. The lockdowns ushered in a new population of OnlyFans creators; these were people who had never

performed any kind of sexual labor in the past but suddenly adopted it, as it was commonly understood by the public as an easy way to make money (Gowayed, Mears, and Occhiuto 2022). Alongside a growing acceptance and viability of sex work, this new cohort found itself enacting sex work based on their own understandings of what others were doing and what might make them the most money.

To be clear, despite the notable public popularity of the platform, the work that takes place on OnlyFans remains largely private because of the paywall required to access it. Creators on OnlyFans must maintain some kind of public presence in order to draw people to their page (for many, this has been Twitter), but the heart of their businesses are for paying eyes only.

The average OnlyFans creator makes \$151 per month and has 20 subscribers (Wise 2022), though the media often focuses on the top tiers who make much more (Bernstein 2019; Donnelly 2021). There are some fascinating disparities in creators' earnings, though, along the lines of gender presentation. Male-presenting creators make significantly less than female-presenting creators on OnlyFans—approximately 60 cents on the dollar (InfluencerMade 2022). This is likely because the majority of OnlyFans creators are women between the ages of 25–35 and typically charge more for monthly subscriptions than male creators (InfluencerMade 2022; Nichols et al. 2020). This creates an opportunity to investigate the experiences of male-presenting OnlyFans creators, in this unique new space where they are suddenly in the minority. This space is fertile ground for study because while the majority of pornography traditionally caters to the straight male gaze, masculine OnlyFans creators are more likely to have audiences mostly comprised of gay men and straight women, among many other identity categories (Neville 2015). Because it's more common for women to sell eroticism in this way than men, masculine presentations in sex work can be seen as subversive.

OnlyFans has provided a platform to amplify male sex workers in particular because its cultural relevance has helped to normalize the practice (Henry and Farvid 2020; Friedman 2014; Mergenthaler and Yasseri 2020). The notion of a male sex worker has traditionally been considered by many to be a “linguistic impossibility,” so the constantly expanding population of them on OnlyFans has contributed to the mission of normalizing male sex work (Scott and Minichiello 2014). This rise in visibility is often attributed to the advent of technology that provided new venues for the advertisement and facilitation of male escort services, which have now evolved to include indirect, online-only sex work venues like OnlyFans (Macphail, Scott, and Minichiello 2015; Minichiello, Scott, and Callander 2013). Marketing the male body as a sexual commodity is at odds with common expressions of masculinity that emphasize agency and aggression, thus opening up space for a proliferation of subversive self-presentations.

#### Situational homosexuality

In examining the discrepancies between sexual identities and sexual behaviors in certain scenarios, scholars typically turn to the phrase “situational homosexuality.” This describes same-sex acts between straight men that are assumed to occur only temporarily, and outside of typical circumstances (Kunzel 2002; Escoffier 2003). A multitude of names for this phenomenon take pains to distinguish between true and false sexuality by emphasizing the contextual nature of these sexual acts: adjectives including “deprivational,” “facultative,” “opportunistic,” and “functional” are all used interchangeably when discussing this form of homosexual behavior (Kunzel 2002; Ward 2015). The presence of a monetary incentive adds additional complexity,

which is reflected in the most well-known and extensively researched expression of situational homosexuality: gay-for-pay pornography.

As one might infer from such a name, gay-for-pay pornography actors are heterosexual men who perform homosexual acts as part of their employment. Widespread fascination stems from the apparent dissonance between their “actual” sexual orientations and their contradictory ability to deliver convincing homosexual performances (Escoffier 2003). How can they maintain a straight identity while clearly experiencing arousal with other men? Why would a straight man willingly engage in this line of work? How do audiences interpret these men’s seemingly fluid sexual identities?

Much of the mystique and fascination surrounding traditional gay-for-pay pornography actors involves the authenticity of their intercourse and the truth of their sexual identities. A simplistic, essentialist understanding of sexuality would argue that any man who has successful sexual relations with another man cannot possibly be 100% straight. However, a nuanced approach to sexual identity does not sell quite as well as the intrigue of speculation, so the paradox of the situational homosexual is often the self-presentation of choice for pornography actors. The possibility that a straight-presenting pornography actor might secretly enjoy his homosexual performances is a driving force for many gay viewers (Dyer 2002). For this reason, it is financially advantageous for male performers to not disclose too much about their personal lives and tease their audience with the false hope that they might have a chance with the object of their sexual fantasy. One convincing factor for audiences is the necessity of authentic on-screen erections and orgasms, though careful editing and behind-the-scenes heterosexual stimulation are often employed, and erections are not necessarily indicative of “bodily truth” or genuine arousal (Escoffier 2003; Waidzunas and Epstein 2015).

According to Mercer (2012), gay men have a “compulsive drive to discover endless iterations and eroticizations of the ideals of masculinity,” driving them to seek out pornography genres such as gay-for-pay. This fetishization of masculinity has long been characteristic of gay culture, as fixating on straight men provides the allure of an “unobtainable ideal” (Mercer 2012; Silva and Whaley 2018). Another possible source of this attraction is the incorporation of danger in the sexual realm. Everyday interactions between gay and straight men often carry an undercurrent of threat due to privilege disparities and a long history of homophobia and violence (Connell 1992). Clarkson (2006) interprets this dynamic as “eroticizing the very values of straight society that have tyrannized their own lives.”

#### Justifying the work

The nomenclature of “gay-for-pay” implies that these men would not seek out same-sex partners if they were not being paid (Escoffier 2003; Kahan 2019). Regardless of sexual orientation, all pornography performers must reconcile their identities and intentions in order to allow themselves to do their jobs. Performers will often adopt certain “sexual scripts,” which Simon and Gagnon (1986) describe as individuals’ interpretations of cultural scenarios and their applications to sexual self-presentation and behavior. Scripting is a vital strategy for gay-for-pay pornography actors to maintain their straight identities while engaging in homosexual behavior. The pathway to sexual permission has been widely theorized, as seen in Escoffier’s (2003) “constraints,” Kahan’s (2019) “models,” and Mercer’s (2012) “alibis” that allow same-sex behavior. These framing devices are reflective of varying explanations for situational homosexuality; respectively, it can be a product of constraints, it can follow set archetypal

models, and it can require excuses. Anderson (2008) also discusses the need for an “antecedent” for most people to accept homosexual behavior, usually a “good cause,” such as the fulfillment of heterosexual needs and desires when female partners are not readily available.

The most immediately relevant incentive to gay-for-pay pornography actors is money. People often seek out sex work because of economic constraints (Escoffier 2003) or financial need (Mercer 2012) and in this case specifically, it is well-documented that men are paid much more for filming gay pornography scenes than straight ones (Escoffier 2003; de Villiers 2019; Banks and Titelbaum 2009). Pornography also serves as a stepping stone toward even more lucrative careers in escorting, providing a clear path for advancement. The “highly organized commercial space” of gay-for-pay pornography sites provides all of the necessary resources for straight men to have gay sex (Escoffier 2003). The financial incentive of participation acts as “both impetus and aphrodisiac,” as demonstrated by the premise of the popular gay-for-pay pornography site Brokestraightboys.com and their tagline: “Every straight guy has his price” (Mercer 2012; De Villiers 2019).

#### Self-presentation in sex work

Porn performers, regardless of gender or sexual orientation, display highly curated, specific fronts, referred to by sociologist and sex work scholar Angela Jones (2020) as “manufactured identities.” In their research on camming, a sex work practice in which models live-stream content to an online audience, Jones noted that the most important identities for cam models to perform were the “invisible” traits of youthfulness, singleness, and bisexuality in order to appear available to the largest possible proportion of their audience. It is helpful to share the elements of one’s identity that are of most interest to the audience while remaining vague and mysterious on most others. Erving Goffman (1959) similarly makes a distinction between the “performer” and the “character” they play, demonstrating the curated, idealized “front” that people display for others. These fronts must be convincing in order to show the audience how to view and interact with them, and most importantly, convince them to take the performance seriously.

The visual aspect of sexual performance is also significant, considering that it is the main source of on-screen appeal and stimulation. Bridges (2014) conceptualizes “sexual aesthetics” as “cultural and stylistic distinctions utilized to delineate symbolic boundaries between gay and straight cultures and individuals.” Sex workers may draw on the aesthetic features that they associate with homosexuality to perform the sexual fluency their audiences may be seeking. Though not necessarily constitutive of sexual identities, some relevant attributes of sexual aesthetics include clothing, behavior, language, and mannerisms (Bridges 2014). It is also worth noting that many key elements of sexual aesthetics are not easily controlled or manipulated. Attributes including, but not limited to, age, weight, body type, penis size, and perceived class are crucial factors that dictate how much sex workers can charge for their services and how popular pornography performers may become (Logan 2010; Minichiello, Scott, and Callander 2013; Clarkson 2006).

Due, in part, to this aesthetic expansion of heterosexuality, “homohysteria,” or fear that one could be perceived as gay, has been steadily declining for over a decade (Clarkson 2006; Anderson 2008; Bridges and Pascoe 2014; Dean 2014). In its place is what Anderson (2008) calls “inclusive masculinity,” which *embraces* feminine expression rather than considering it to be

unprofessional or undesirable. By selectively incorporating various sexual “others” into their identities and presentations, straight men are able to tailor what Bridges and Pascoe (2014) call “hybrid masculinities.” These typically take the form of straight men employing gay aesthetics in order to appear more thoughtful and open-minded.

Any deviant behaviors or desires displayed by straight men are considered to be exceptional rather than natural and are therefore unregulated and excused. Straight white men are especially well-equipped to leverage the resources afforded to them in order to dodge stigma and normalize their own behavior (Bridges and Pascoe 2014; Ward 2015). Meanwhile, men of color are allowed no such agency, often written off as discreetly gay or on the “down-low,” or “DL,” for short (Carrillo and Hoffman 2016; Ward 2015). The concept of hybrid masculinities demonstrates that systems of inequality are dependent on one’s level of privilege. While the ability to explore masculinity in previously unforeseen ways is surely significant, it falls short of challenging these systems of power (Bridges and Pascoe 2014).

Upon reviewing the relevant literature, it is clear that a need exists to study male sex work in the new online context of OnlyFans. As one of many venues in which individualized erotic labor now takes place, OnlyFans can provide an illuminating case study about the boundaries of straight male sexuality when catering to a gay male audience. After I lay out the methods I used to perform this research, I will offer a discussion of the themes I noticed in my interviews and what we might learn from them.

## DATA AND METHODS

This research draws on nine qualitative interviews with straight male OnlyFans creators. Interviews were the best strategy to answer my research questions because they are designed to explicitly get at process-oriented issues in ways that observation or surveys cannot. Additionally, they allowed me to establish rapport with each creator and probe deeper into the answers that they provided.

I recruited participants by searching Twitter with keywords relating to OnlyFans, gender, and sexual orientation (“straight OnlyFans,” “OnlyFans man/guy/boy” and other variations) because Twitter is one of the main online outlets for account promotion, as it does not censor explicit content. I sent direct messages to 281 accounts found in these search results, explaining my research and asking if they’d be interested in participating. Of those who responded to me, most either were not interested in talking to a researcher or wanted to be paid for the interview, which I was not able to offer. In the end, I conducted 20 interviews with creators of varying identities for a larger project on representations of masculinity on OnlyFans. This paper features nine of those creators because of their straight male identity. Six interviews took place in a private Zoom meeting room that lasted, on average, about one hour each, and three were conducted via email with participants who were uncomfortable or unable to appear for a synchronous conversation (Ratislavová and Ratislav 2014; Hawkins 2018; Burns 2010).

This sample is therefore one of convenience and makes no claims at representing the entire population of straight male OnlyFans creators. However, it is quite broad. Participants ranged in age from 21 to 36 years old and they had been creating on the platform for anywhere between two weeks and two years. Eight of them self-identified as cisgender males and one identified as a transgender male. The average participant had 80 subscribers on OnlyFans, charged \$9.16 per month for access to their content, and was ranked among the 22.73% top

earners on the platform. Seven of the creators I spoke to self-identified as white or Caucasian while one identified as Asian-American and one identified as Hispanic.

To analyze interview data, I performed open coding of written transcripts in ATLAS.ti (Gibbs 2018). Throughout the process of recruitment and interviewing, I also kept ongoing analytic memos about my observations in order to clarify my thinking and work through what the data were telling me.

All names presented in this research are pseudonyms, though some are the same names that my participants use for their online profiles. Because sex workers usually operate under assumed or professional names and wanted due credit for their effort, some participants asked me to just use that as their pseudonym (Guenther 2009), while others chose a random name or asked me to do the same, as has been done in other research (Heaton 2022; Orne 2017). Additionally, all descriptive and demographic characteristics are self-identified by participants.

This research was approved by Temple University's Institutional Review Board in the fall of 2020 and all initial recruitment messages followed an accepted script. All participants provided verbal and/or written consent prior to our interviews after receiving and reviewing a comprehensive consent form.

## FINDINGS

Through the analysis of my transcripts and memos, I came to notice the following themes, to be discussed in order: (1) OnlyFans creators have varying definitions of and relationships to the label "sex worker," (2) straight men curate and perform specific personas when creating content for a gay male audience, (3) participants were mainly motivated by money and attention to engage in this work, and (4) they often set clear boundaries with subscribers to manage expectations.

### Sex work definition and identification

To begin, I found widespread disagreement among creators about what exactly constitutes "sex work." The sex work industry is wide-ranging and diverse, and the term "sex work" itself has become an umbrella term include any sexual service from in-person escorting to webcam modeling. In order to avoid misrepresentation, I asked all of my participants for their definitions of sex work as well as whether or not they identify with such a label. Many did identify as such, but some did not, and they each had their own nuanced definition of what it constituted.

One particularly illustrative example can be found in the juxtaposition of definitions from two participants, Waldo and Simon. Waldo is a 32 year-old straight, white man who created his OnlyFans profile in early 2020, at the onset of the coronavirus pandemic. When I asked in our email conversation if he considers himself to be a sex worker, he said, "OnlyFans falls under the umbrella of sex work, whether it's online or in person, if you're making money off selling your body as a sexual object then you're a sex worker." I followed up by asking if he thinks it is common for OnlyFans creators to self-identify as sex workers, to which he responded, "Oh ya, I don't know anyone that doesn't. People that are in the industry don't care about the negative connotation of the labels that accompany it." In situating OnlyFans within the sex work industry, Waldo made clear his stance that any work involving a monetary exchange around sexual pleasure is sex work, and also cited the fact that most of the stigma around this label comes from outside the industry.

Simon, on the other hand, is a 33-year-old white man who identifies as “heteroflexible” and has been a sex worker for upwards of a decade, primarily performing in adult films and on camming websites with his female partner. When considering the age of OnlyFans—6 years old at the time of this writing—Simon’s 2-year tenure on the platforms make him a veteran creator compared to most, so his level of experience provided him with a different perspective on what sex work is and is not:

You know, I’ve seen people call themselves sex workers that are hardly sex workers...in my mind, a sex worker is someone who has sex with another person to make money. And I think I see a lot of—and actually, OnlyFans people love to do this shit. They call themselves sex workers, they talk about being stigmatized and they talk about how hard it is to be a sex worker when they don't even have to have sex with other people, you know, and that's what being a sex worker is and that kind of ties into what I was saying earlier about what it used to mean to be a sex worker and that's why the title “sex worker” was so bad because it meant you were fucking other people. And that's why it's my—when I call myself a sex worker, I didn't always, because I didn't like that term, but that's what I am. I have sex with other people for money. If I just post a picture of myself on the Internet, and it was just me, I wouldn't really consider myself a sex worker, or at least my own personal definition of what it means.

Here we see that, for Simon, the term “sex worker” is more literal—sex must be performed in order to consider the work as such. From this view, most of Waldo’s OnlyFans content would not be considered sex work because he told me he primarily films solo videos. However, there was also some flexibility in Simon’s adoption of the term. He didn’t fully embrace the “sex worker” label until he pursued it full-time, even though, by his own definition, he had been performing sex work for much longer.

#### Explanations of work

One of the key things I sought to understand in this research is why straight men perform for gay audiences on OnlyFans. In speaking with participants, I found a variety of answers, but unsurprisingly, money was the most common reason. At its core, what sets OnlyFans apart from other (free to use) social networking sites like Twitter is its business model. Use of the site is intentional for both audiences and creators; it is foremost a financial transaction. If not for this, these men likely would not have made OnlyFans accounts in the first place. With this as a given, I was interested to learn what other factors supplemented the possibility for profit on OnlyFans.

A common theme among a few participants was that of attention as an added benefit of their work. Praise cannot pay the bills, of course, but some men find positive affirmation from their subscribers to be a welcome boost to their self-esteem. Santiago is a 24 year-old pansexual, Hispanic man, in addition to being a rare exception who did not necessarily need the financial benefits of OnlyFans. He cited attention as his primary reason for creating on the platform because his family runs a successful construction business from which he makes his living: “So I don't really have the need for the money, that's why I, I'm telling you that it's just for the attention. I do like the attention a lot.” Others simply appreciated the praise for their work, regardless of where it was coming from, such as Simon, quoted earlier: “I like being admired...I think it's an honor to have someone to look at you and say nice things about you and I don't care what parts they have while they're doing that.”

One other interesting case can be found in Frank, a 22 year-old straight, white man. His content caters to the foot fetish community, though he himself does not consider himself to be

a member. Part of his work includes occasional in-person meetups with fans that have traveled up to eleven hours to partake in sexual “foot worship” sessions with him. Because he does not share this interest with his subscribers, he is able to compartmentalize his work below the waist and rely solely on his own definition of what is sexual: “...me putting my foot on someone, I don't really think of it as a super huge sexual activity...I view more like traditional sex as sex. Um, even though I know there's like so many different definitions of it and how you want to perceive it.” Frank therefore did not take issue with physically touching other men in a way that was pleasurable to them if he himself did not experience that same pleasure, which makes an important point about reciprocity that I will revisit later in this discussion.

I'd like to reiterate once more, though, that those searching for high-level explanations of this work or grand processes of personal reconciliation will be sorely disappointed. Duke, a 21 year-old straight, white man sums this up succinctly: “I don't really think much about it...when I turn on my camera it's time for me go to work, do my job, do whatever makes me money.” While this does not apply to all creators, and not even all that I spoke to, it's important to remember that for some, it really is that simple. The money is the driver of this line of work, and without it, the work would not exist.

#### Persona construction

While my participants and the existing literature made it clear that authenticity is a highly valuable commodity in online sex work (Jones 2020; Henry and Farvid 2020; Laurin 2019), there remains a certain level of identity augmentation inherent in online self-presentation. When I probed participants about this in interviews, I noticed that the seemingly manufactured parts of my participants' identities were usually rooted in some form of truth. That is to say, they amplified certain parts of themselves that they knew would be more desirable on-camera. For example, when describing his camming persona, Simon said, “I'm more extroverted, I'm more assertive, I'm more attentive. [In real life] I'm actually a total ambivert. After my [camming] shows I crawl into my bed and hide...” For many like Simon, the labor necessary to produce these intimate performances is extremely draining. Duke, on the other hand, shared that he intentionally performs what he refers to as his “gay-for-pay” personality that acts more open, playful, and, at times feminine. By drawing on popular depictions that they have seen in the media coupled with representations of masculinity that they presume gay men will enjoy, these creators perform a certain front of male heterosexuality with a hint of homosexuality in order to craft a fantasy for their audience.

Santiago, the person quoted above who preferred attention to money, disclosed to me that he engages in deceptive marketing strategies regarding his sexuality. While he disclosed to me that he identifies as pansexual, meaning he is attracted to people regardless of their gender, he chooses to market himself online as straight because he knows that this identity carries a wider appeal:

[F]or example, on my Twitter, it says that I'm straight. And I use that as a prop—as a marketing strategy. I mean, gays out there just love the idea of—fantasy of a heterosexual man having sex with other men. It just turns them on and I used it to my advantage and it has worked for me. A lot, a lot.

Because he is, in fact, attracted to men, Santiago is able to experience sexual pleasure in his content while passing it off as a taboo, exploratory act to his subscribers. He felt that gay men would be more interested in seeing a straight man have sex with men than seeing “one of their

own,” which has largely proven true. Santiago is still a part of this sample of straight men because this is how he advertises himself online, and this marketing strategy highlights the appeal of straight men for gay audiences.

This finding led me to ask my participants what it is about straight identities that seems to appeal to gay audiences so much. Many emphasized the idolization of masculine features like dominance, strength, and muscularity, and saw straight men as an unobtainable ideal.

Frank, who creates content for the foot fetish community, elaborated:

Okay, so the, the whole thing of being straight to them they really like. And some people are very sexually attracted and are turned on to the whole idea of them being beneath a straight person. They like that idea...[a]nother thing I think is that it's one of those things that they want it, but it's like they can't have it, type of thing, yeah so it's, it's that too.

Frank confirmed for me that the forbidden nature of straight/gay relations are a draw for many OnlyFans subscribers. Additionally, as mentioned in the literature review, he described a tense, charged dynamic between straight and gay men because of the power differential between the two groups; not only do gay men find straight male physiques attractive, but also the privileged social positions that they represent.

#### Boundary maintenance

One way that participants were able to communicate their straight identities was through the clear establishment and maintenance of boundaries. These took many forms, including intentionally limiting direct communication with subscribers and denying requests for certain types of content. Among a handful of participants, I noticed a more tangible, physical boundary—an overwhelming trend of discomfort around anal penetration. Without asking explicitly about this topic, it came up several times in our conversations:

“I will show my asshole, per se, but I'm not—uh uh—nothing's going in!”

-Peter, 21 year-old straight, white man

“Um, so a lot of males ask for anal-specific things. So the most I've done is, um, slight finger play. But as far as like any big object insertion, that's, that's not something I'm comfortable doing.”

-Magnus, 36 year-old straight, Asian-American man

“I've tried—I even had like butt plugs before, but I just never could like—I never liked doing, putting stuff up my ass, to be honest.”

-Duke, 21 year-old straight, white man

“No butt stuff for now. [LAUGHS] But you know...it's on my radar.”

-Simon, 33 year-old heteroflexible, white man

It is significant that nearly half of my interviewees mentioned anal stimulation without specific prompts or probes on the topic. These quotes tell me that not only is this a firm boundary set by many creators with little to no room for negotiation, but also that there is a sizeable demand among OnlyFans subscribers to see a straight man experience anal penetration. I surmise that this is off-limits for creators because the receptive role of penetration is traditionally labeled as a more feminine (and, in this case, gay) sexual act. In order to maintain their heterosexuality and avoid compromising their masculinity, many straight male creators are not willing to perform such acts.

Another physical boundary I noticed among participants was that of touching other men—if they were comfortable being photographed or recording alongside other men, it was usually under the pretense that they would not be required to perform sexual acts on one another. Recall earlier Simon saying that he doesn't care "what parts" his audience has. He went on to say, "If they were here in front of me, or if they are touching me, that's a little bit different, but being admired from afar, I think, is a wonderful thing that I embrace." Physical distance is an important factor for Simon's comfort with performing for audiences that he is not typically attracted to. In other cases, when performing in threesome films with other men, for example, he only touches them in pursuit of larger (heterosexual) goals: "The type of films I make and the things I do and when I do it—because I have done stuff with other guys before—lightly, I've, you know, touched and things but it's always been with other women around and the focus is almost always on the other ladies."

Similarly, Duke shared, "I'm fine doing nude pictures with guys, but I'm not going to, like, touch." Here we see that some creators' proximity to other men is a determining factor of their comfort—men can be present, in-person or in a virtual audience, but cannot demand too much engagement.

On another hand, Frank discussed an interesting double-standard with me that he said "messes with [his] brain." In the aforementioned "foot worship" meetups, he is comfortable touching these men with his feet because of his compartmentalizing strategies; he treats his feet as separate from his sexuality because he himself is not aroused by feet. The tables would turn, however, if a woman requested these services Frank felt differently:

...[W]ith a woman, I don't think I could do that. I'm just—because I feel like it's disrespectful. And just, you know, it's just like how I was raised. I just think that's wrong. And I couldn't do that. But, you know, for another male. I was like, you know, I don't really have a problem with it.

Foot fetish aside, this reveals an important sexual boundary for straight men—engagement of any sort with gay men is not seen as real (as that with a woman might be) because the attraction is not mutual. As mentioned earlier this leads me to believe that reciprocity is required for the mediated sexual interactions on OnlyFans to be thought of as legitimate by straight male creators. This also presents an opportunity to mention that straight men's OnlyFans content is almost exclusively created for the gay male gaze; some of my male participants mentioned having occasional female viewers, though they often do not subscribe long-term.

## DISCUSSION

Two conflicting narratives about straight male OnlyFans creators have emerged in this research. Most participants seemed to be telling me that their motivation for doing this work is the financial outcome, and they are comfortable enough in their sexualities to perform for a homosexual audience in a way that does not impact their own identities. However, this presentation of something "not that deep" appeared to me as highly strategic and calculated. While they may not have any psychological investment in the work that they do, logistically, they know exactly what they are doing, with the explanations, constructed personas, and boundaries to prove it. Whether they discovered the market for straight male content intentionally or by happenstance, they have caught wind of what works and have embraced it. Because they are simply posting sexual content of themselves online, they technically cannot

control who views it or what purposes it is used for. They are not required to engage directly with homosexuality, even if they know that it is the subtext of their popularity.

As I demonstrated throughout the literature review, previous work on the topic of situational homosexuality takes great pains to explain any deviation from heterosexuality (Escoffier 2003; Kahan 2019; Mercer 2012). In that body of research, homosexual acts must be justified and understandable to the outside audience—financial incentive, sexual exploration, or deprivation of heterosexual sex are all acceptable reasons. But what if the act is less clearly understood as homosexual? How do our understandings shift? I am hesitant to refer to straight male OnlyFans creators as gay-for-pay in the same way as in the pornography literature because OnlyFans is a completely different genre of sex work from pornography. While it certainly contains mostly pornographic or sexual content, it is a highly individualized and agentic form of sex work with lower barriers to entry and higher expectations for intimacy. While traditional gay-for-pay pornography forces the viewer to grapple with this contradiction, OnlyFans incorporates the same dynamic but in a less intrusive way, occupying a grey area between these two extremes. A straight man’s OnlyFans account is not an inherently gay space, though it may take on that role for gay viewers.

Additionally, due to the coronavirus pandemic, a great majority of OnlyFans content was filmed solo (at the time of this research), meaning that there are not the same physical contact requirements as there are in gay-for-pay porn. A selective awareness of how this content will be interpreted by the gay male gaze dictates their sexual *performances* without altering their personal *desires*. This distance from other men both on-screen and in their audiences allows straight male OnlyFans creators to craft clearly defined identities that are as close to or far from homosexuality as they are comfortable with.

The story about sexuality that this research uncovers is one of continuous definition in an online context. The creator and audience each have their own definitions of what they consider sexual or pleasurable, and, on OnlyFans (as in many other forms of sexual labor), there is no requirement that these definitions overlap. Within the straight male market on OnlyFans, the common understanding of where the demand lies creates a profitable opportunity to any creators who are comfortable enough with their own sexualities to put themselves on display for a wide, mostly gay audience. While I would usually argue for a thorough interrogation of the difference between online and offline behavior (see Welles 2015 and Williams 2010 for a discussion of the “mapping principle”), in this situation it is clear that the dissonance between online self-presentation and offline identity does not need to be resolved or explained—the financial exchanges in this scenario quiet the majority of internal concern and external suspicion. Above all, the participation of both subscribers and creators is voluntary, so either party would cease to participate if they did not experience gratification in some way, be it financial or sexual.

## LIMITATIONS

There are several limitations to this research worth noting. Foremost, by nature of my social media recruitment methods and inability to provide compensation for interviews, it was incredibly difficult to get access to participants. Those who were willing to speak with me over Zoom are likely not representative of typical OnlyFans creators because the majority of sex workers (rightfully) wanted to be paid for the labor of an interview, which I was unable to offer. Those willing to speak with me for free are more likely to either be fairly financially successful

and not need the extra money, or just starting off and hoping for an outlet to promote and discuss their work. Additionally, while Zoom meetings certainly fulfilled the purpose of allowing me to interview participants that I would not regularly have access to during a pandemic, there are several drawbacks of this medium including inability to read body language and spatial cues (if participants had their cameras turned on), limited opportunities to build rapport, and misunderstanding and lag due to poor connections (Seitz 2016; Lobe, Morgan, and Hoffman 2020).

Furthermore, because this research does not have a comparison group of OnlyFans creators from intersecting identities other than straight men, I am unable to make claims about the novelty of the identity management strategies that participants discussed. Thus, this paper can only focus on what I have learned about this specific population. Future research can and should make even stronger arguments through the use of a comparison group and more strategic sampling.

I feel it is necessary to briefly reflect on my positionality in this research and the influence that my identity may have had on the process of data collection. On March 19<sup>th</sup>, 2021, I wrote the following in a reflexive memo:

Several participants have referred to me when speaking about their gay subscriber bases. I, of course, hadn't come out to them formally during our short interviews, but they lumped me in with conversations about gay men...Because of this, it's important to consider how participants see me as a gay man and how that relates to the ways they talk about their audiences, and if they would or wouldn't say certain things because of who I am.

While my identity as a gay man certainly shifted the dynamic with my participants, I consider it to be a strength of this research because they are already comfortable interacting with gay men. This seemed to allow them to open up to me with more ease because they were already used to performing (and sometimes discussing) incredibly vulnerable sexual acts for a similar audience. However, this same reason may also have created hesitancy among some participants who feared saying the wrong thing or offending me in some way.

This research so far sets the stage for future work to further clarify the new meanings of sexuality in the context of online sex work on OnlyFans. As this platform continues to grow in popularity and profitability, it will be important to observe how these dynamics evolve. Many of my participants cited OnlyFans as a short-term plan to make as much money as possible before leaving the platform to pursue other goals. As the United States continues to censor and regulate sexual content online, sex work platforms of all kinds are at risk of collapsing and creators are fully aware of this precarity. For example, in August of 2021, OnlyFans announced that it would be banning explicit content from its site, only to reverse their decision about a week later, following widespread backlash from the sex workers that populate the majority of its accounts. Further work should take these dangers into account and also explore the alternative platforms currently being used and developed, some of which are mentioned in the introduction of this paper.

## CONCLUSION

Because straight men have traditionally held the majority of privilege, space, and power in society, it is important to study them in the environment of OnlyFans, where they are minoritized among other creators and must commodify themselves in a way they aren't usually

required to. They have the freedom to call on and incorporate homosexual aesthetics and behaviors whenever it is culturally, interpersonally, or financially advantageous to do so, while retaining their heterosexual identities as a safe retreat. Thus, straight male OnlyFans creators are able to carry the technical label of “gay-for-pay” if they so choose while remaining physically and emotionally removed from situational homosexuality. They retain the status and privilege associated with heterosexual masculinity, even if they let gay men peek behind the (shower) curtain for a monthly fee.

Also, because anyone with a camera, Internet access, and a bank account can create an OnlyFans page, this new genre of sexual labor does not have any of the gatekeepers that previously limited participation in the traditional, studio-produced pornography that legitimized gay-for-pay. While this sexual behavior may not be situationally *homosexual*, it is still situational. In the words of Escoffier (2003), “All sexual performance is fundamentally situational and does not always result in long-lasting social psychological commitment to any one form of sexual activity.” The natures of pornography and online sex work force a situationality on all performers by the very presence a camera and an imagined audience (Mercer 2012; Escoffier 2003). Thus, OnlyFans exists in a grey area between homophobia and utopia, where creators can perform sexual personas curated for their specific audience, which requires varying levels of imagination on both fronts.

This work contributes to the vast literature on both online sex work and male sex work more broadly by highlighting the core animating forces of money and affirmation for doing this work, no matter the audience. To maintain their heterosexuality, the men I interviewed constructed clear boundaries by openly communicating their sexual identities, as well as the acts and services that they are and are not willing to perform. Much of this work reifies traditional, masculine values that emphasize authority and conceal vulnerability, but the mere fact of participants’ engagement with online sex work cracked the mold in significant ways. By putting their likenesses for sale on OnlyFans and emphasizing personas that they know will please their gay audiences, these men embody amorphous sexualities that appear differently depending on the eyes of the beholder. The gay male gaze acts as a powerful force that can influence the self-presentations of straight male sex workers, but their straight identities prove flexible yet resilient when there is profit to be made.

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## BIOGRAPHY

**Tyler Burgese** is a doctoral student and teaching assistant in Temple University's department of Sociology. His research focuses on sexuality and social media. Tyler previously attended Rutgers University—Camden where he earned a B.A. in Sociology in 2019. He currently works as a research assistant at the University of Pennsylvania's Program on Sexuality, Technology, & Action Research (PSTAR) on projects involving LGBTQ+ youth sexual and mental health. You can keep up with him on Twitter @tylerburgese.