

University Students' Perception of Onlyfans: An Exploratory Study on Knowledge, Consumption, and Attitudes

Jesús Alberto Sánchez Valtierra

Universidad Virtual del estado de Guanajuato

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study examines university students' perceptions of OnlyFans, a subscription-based content platform that has gained significant visibility in recent years. A sample of 160 university students participated in a structured survey that assessed their familiarity with the platform, consumption habits, moral attitudes, and social proximity to content creators. The results indicate that 93% of respondents are familiar with OnlyFans, 30% have purchased content, 70% do not consider its use to be morally objectionable, and 50% personally know someone who creates content on the platform. These findings suggest a substantial normalization of OnlyFans within the university context, warranting further examination of generational shifts regarding digitalized sex work, content monetization, and evolving attitudes toward the consumption of adult content among higher education students.

Keywords: OnlyFans, university students, social perceptions, digital content, digital sex work, subscription platforms

Resumen

Este estudio exploratorio examina las percepciones de estudiantes universitarios sobre OnlyFans, una plataforma de contenido por suscripción que ha ganado notable visibilidad en años recientes. Una muestra de 160 estudiantes universitarios participó en una encuesta estructurada que evaluó su familiaridad con la plataforma, hábitos de consumo, actitudes morales y proximidad social con creadores de contenido. Los resultados indican que el 93% de los encuestados conoce OnlyFans, el 30% ha comprado contenido, el 70% no considera su uso moralmente objetable y el 50% conoce personalmente a alguien que crea contenido en la plataforma. Estos hallazgos sugieren una normalización sustancial de OnlyFans en el contexto universitario, justificando un mayor examen de los cambios generacionales respecto al trabajo sexual digitalizado, la monetización de contenido y las actitudes cambiantes hacia el consumo de contenido adulto entre estudiantes de educación superior.

Palabras clave: OnlyFans, estudiantes universitarios, percepciones sociales, contenido digital, trabajo sexual digital, plataformas de suscripción

INTRODUCTION

Digital platforms have fundamentally reconfigured content production, distribution, and consumption over the past decade. OnlyFans, launched in 2016, represents a particularly significant case within this digital ecosystem. While theoretically designed to monetize diverse content through monthly subscriptions, its association with adult content has generated substantial social, ethical, and academic debate centered on the normalization of digitalized sex work, individual creator economies, and emerging forms of internet-based entrepreneurship (Aránguez, 2023).

OnlyFans' expansion coincides with broader transformations in collective attitudes toward sexuality, particularly among digital natives. University students constitute an especially relevant population for understanding these cultural shifts. Their status as digital natives, combined with the identity and sexual exploration characteristic of

emerging adulthood, positions them as an ideal demographic for analyzing how platforms like OnlyFans are received, normalized, and integrated into youth culture.

Despite the platform's exponential growth and undeniable cultural impact, empirical research examining university students' perceptions of OnlyFans remains limited, particularly in Spanish-speaking contexts. This study addresses this gap by exploring knowledge levels, consumption patterns, moral attitudes, and social proximity to OnlyFans among university students, thereby contributing to understanding how new generations negotiate boundaries between entertainment, sexuality, and digital economy.

Theoretical Framework

OnlyFans operates within the "creator economy," a model where individuals generate income directly from audiences without traditional intermediaries. Aránguez (2023) conceptualizes this phenomenon as the "uberization of pornography," highlighting how digital platforms facilitate direct connections between creators and consumers while democratizing content production but simultaneously transferring risks and responsibilities to individual workers.

This shift represents a paradigmatic rupture in adult entertainment industries. Tynan and Linehan (2024) argue that OnlyFans allows content creators greater control over their material, pricing, and subscriber relationships, contrasting sharply with traditional pornography industry models where performers typically have less agency and receive reduced economic compensation.

Sex work and adult content continue facing considerable social stigmatization despite growing platform visibility. Ilieva (2024) explores tensions between self-representation, social stigma, and public attitudes faced by sexual content creators, who receive moral judgments not applied with equal intensity to other forms of digital work. However, recent research suggests attitudes toward digitalized sex work may be evolving, especially among younger populations, with normalization of sexual content on social networks and greater acceptance of sexual diversity potentially contributing to decreased stigma (Lawlor et al., 2024).

Regarding OnlyFans consumers, research has identified diverse profiles and motivations. Litam et al. (2022) found that OnlyFans users present particular sexual characteristics and attitudes, including greater openness toward sexuality and more liberal positions. Ji and Li (2025) explore how OnlyFans use relates to upward social comparison processes and personal satisfaction, suggesting the platform fulfills psychological functions transcending mere sexual content consumption.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic research on OnlyFans has experienced notable growth since 2020, addressing various platform dimensions. Uttarapong et al. (2022) examined how OnlyFans functions as an online community providing social support to adult content creators through digital patronage, underscoring that the platform represents not only economic transactions but also spaces of social connection and validation.

Hamilton et al. (2022) investigated motivations for OnlyFans content creation, identifying economic factors, autonomy, and creativity as primary drivers. Creators value flexibility, creative control, and opportunities to monetize aspects of their identity that other platforms restrict or censor. From marketing perspectives, Arenas et al. (2023) analyzed how social networks, particularly Twitter, function as vectors for promoting OnlyFans content, revealing sophisticated digital marketing strategies including free content as "previews" of premium material.

Anciones Anguita and Checa Romero (2025) investigated erotic content platform promotion on social networks and its impact on young people, warning about normalization of digital sex work among adolescents without adequate understanding of long-term economic, psychological, and social implications. Buasirithanarat and Yensabai (2024) examined public policy implications for sexual content creators on OnlyFans, underscoring tensions between public morality, labor rights, and individual freedom while highlighting needs for regulatory frameworks protecting digital workers without excessively restricting expression.

Finally, Sánchez-Valtierra et al. (2024) provide conceptual frameworks for understanding how platforms like OnlyFans affect mental health of users and creators, particularly young populations vulnerable to social pressures and constant comparisons.

METHODOLOGY

This exploratory cross-sectional study employed a quantitative approach to evaluate university students' perceptions of OnlyFans.

The sample consisted of 160 university students recruited through non-probabilistic convenience sampling. Participants were active students in higher education institutions without specific restrictions on age, major, or academic level. While convenience sampling was necessary for this exploratory study, it limits generalizability of findings to broader university populations.

A structured questionnaire with closed questions evaluated four dimensions: (1) knowledge of OnlyFans, (2) content consumption, (3) moral attitudes, and (4) social closeness to content creators. Specific questions included:

- Do you know what OnlyFans is?
- Have you purchased content on OnlyFans?
- Do you consider OnlyFans morally acceptable?
- Do you know anyone who produces content on OnlyFans?

The questionnaire's brevity facilitated completion while limiting depth of responses. Future research should consider validated instruments with established psychometric properties.

Data was collected through digital surveys distributed among university students. Confidentiality and anonymity of responses were guaranteed. Participants were informed about the study's purpose and provided implicit consent by completing the survey.

Descriptive analysis of responses was performed, calculating frequencies and percentages for each evaluated variable using basic statistical procedures.

The study respected ethical principles of research with human participants, guaranteeing anonymity, confidentiality, and participants' right to decline participation. No personally identifiable information was collected.

RESULTS

Survey results from 160 university students reveal four key patterns regarding OnlyFans familiarity, consumption, moral attitudes, and social proximity to creators.

Practically all respondents (93%, $n=149$) reported knowing what OnlyFans is, while only 7% ($n=11$) were unfamiliar with the platform. This indicates extraordinary cultural penetration of OnlyFans within the university population.

Regarding consumption patterns, 30% ($n=48$) of participants indicated having purchased content on OnlyFans, while 70% ($n=112$) have not made purchases. Although knowledge of OnlyFans is nearly universal, active consumption is limited to approximately one-third of students, revealing a substantial gap between awareness and engagement.

Concerning moral attitudes, 70% (n=112) of respondents expressed that they do not consider OnlyFans to be morally objectionable, contrasting with 30% (n=48) who maintain moral reservations. This distribution indicates predominantly permissive or neutral attitudes toward OnlyFans among university students.

Regarding social proximity, 50% (n=80) of participants reported personally knowing someone who produces content on OnlyFans, while 50% (n=80) do not know any creators. This finding is particularly significant, indicating that content creation on OnlyFans is not a distant phenomenon for half of university students but rather part of their immediate social networks.

Overall, these data reveal a consistent pattern: OnlyFans is widely known, moderately consumed, mostly accepted, and socially proximate for a considerable proportion of university students.

DISCUSSION

The finding that 93% of students know OnlyFans far exceeds recognition rates of many established digital platforms, attributable to the platform's ubiquitous presence in social network discourse, mass media, and popular culture (Arenas et al., 2023). This extreme visibility among university students contrasts sharply with historical invisibility of sex work, indicating cultural shifts toward visibilization and potential normalization of such activities. However, visibility does not necessarily equate to deep understanding of economic, psychological, and social dynamics involved in OnlyFans content creation.

The substantial gap between knowledge (93%) and consumption (30%) invites multiple interpretations. Curiosity or passive interest does not necessarily translate into active consumption behavior. Economic factors, personal preferences, or technological barriers may limit conversion of knowledge into consumption. Litam et al. (2022) suggest that active consumption is associated with specific psychosexual profiles, explaining why not all who know the platform become consumers. Ji and Li (2025) highlight that OnlyFans use involves social comparison and personal satisfaction processes that may attract or deter different users according to individual characteristics.

This disparity may also reflect differences between cultural familiarity and economic commitment. Students constantly exposed to OnlyFans references in memes, conversations, and social networks may recognize the platform without feeling compelled to consume its content, suggesting that media visibility does not automatically translate into active participation.

The finding that 70% of students do not consider OnlyFans morally objectionable contrasts markedly with historical attitudes toward sex work and pornography. Several factors may contribute to this majority acceptance:

1. Digital native perspectives: Current university students have grown up with practically unlimited access to sexual content online, potentially normalizing pornography and reducing associated stigma.
2. Creator autonomy framing: OnlyFans emphasizes creator autonomy and direct subscriber relationships, potentially differentiating it positively from traditional pornography industries in public perception (Tynan & Linehan, 2024).
3. Contemporary social movements: Sex-positive feminism and advocacy for sex workers' rights may have influenced more permissive attitudes toward consensual sex work.

However, Ilieva (2024) warns that stigma reduction may be superficial, with content creators continuing to face considerable discrimination and social judgment. The coexistence of 70% moral acceptance with 30% consumption suggests many students who do not consume OnlyFans do not morally condemn it either, potentially reflecting pragmatic indifference rather than active approval—a broader generational attitude of tolerance toward others' sexual and economic decisions.

The finding that 50% of students personally know OnlyFans content creators is extraordinary and raises important questions. This level of social proximity likely contributes to destigmatization, as individuals tend to hold more positive attitudes toward behaviors performed by acquaintances or friends. Uttarapong et al. (2022)

note that OnlyFans functions as an online community providing social support to creators, and this community dimension may facilitate more individuals considering content creation as viable, especially in contexts of youth economic precarity.

However, the nature of this "personal knowledge" merits scrutiny. Substantial differences exist between someone directly confiding their OnlyFans participation versus discovering this information indirectly or accidentally. Are students openly sharing their platform involvement with close circles, or are they inferring participation through indirect clues? This distinction has implications for understanding actual normalization levels versus mere awareness.

The normalization also raises concerns highlighted by Anciones Anguita and Checa Romero (2025), who warn about erotic content platform promotion influences on adolescents who may lack maturity to fully understand long-term implications of creating sexual content online, including digital permanence, exploitation risks, and psychosocial consequences.

These results situate within broader contexts of the "creator economy" and "uberization of work" conceptualized by Aránguez (2023). OnlyFans represents a specific manifestation of contemporary labor trends where workers assume increasingly individual risks in exchange for theoretical autonomy and flexibility.

Hamilton et al. (2022) identify economic motivations, autonomy, and creativity as primary drivers for OnlyFans creators. However, economic precarization of young generations may mean many creators engage not through genuinely free choice but economic necessity disguised as entrepreneurship. For many students, traditional labor options, part-time retail or service jobs offer low wages, inflexible schedules, and few development opportunities. Against this backdrop, OnlyFans may appear attractive: work from home, self-imposed schedules, potential for higher income. Yet this comparison obscures particular risks of digital sex work, including content permanence, personal security risks, and exploitation potential.

Buasirithanarat and Yensabai (2024) underscore urgency for developing public policies protecting digital workers without restricting freedoms, requiring simultaneous consideration of labor rights, exploitation protection, and freedom of expression.

Sánchez-Valtierra et al. (2024) document how social networks impact adolescents' psychological well-being through mechanisms—social comparison, external validation, exposure to potentially harmful content—relevant for OnlyFans. Creators may experience pressure to produce increasingly explicit content, face harassment, or experience emotional consequences of commodifying sexuality. Consumers may develop unrealistic expectations about relationships and intimacy, as noted by Lawlor et al. (2024).

How does OnlyFans use—whether as creator or consumer—affect university students' romantic relationships and friendships? Conversations about monogamy, fidelity, jealousy, and trust become complicated when relationship members create or consume OnlyFans content. Data about personal knowledge of creators suggests these conversations are occurring in university social circles, though they remain mostly invisible to researchers and educators.

This study's aggregated data likely obscure significant gender differences in how students know, consume, morally perceive, and relate to OnlyFans. Existing literature suggests OnlyFans, while technically accessible to any gender, is heavily feminized in both creator base and public perceptions. Future studies should disaggregate data by gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic level, religiosity, and political ideology to capture these asymmetries and provide nuanced understandings.

If practically all university students know OnlyFans and half personally know creators, educational institutions should consider whether and how to address this reality. Rather than promoting or condemning, institutions could provide critical frameworks helping students understand economic, legal, psychological, and social dimensions of digital platform work. Higher education could equip students with tools for making informed decisions about participation in these digital economies.

Long-term sustainability of OnlyFans as economic strategy merits scrutiny. While some creators obtain considerable income, most probably earn modest amounts. Creator economy structures tend toward extremely unequal distributions where few achieve extraordinary success while most subsist with marginal income. Students considering OnlyFans as economic option should understand these statistical realities, not only success narratives dominating public discourse.

Contextual variability

This data would likely change if replicated in different university contexts. Attitudes toward OnlyFans probably vary according to institution type (public vs. private, secular vs. religious), geographic location, and student body socioeconomic profiles. Studies at confessional universities would probably yield lower moral acceptance rates, while cosmopolitan urban contexts might show higher figures. This contextual variability underscores importance of not generalizing findings beyond specific populations studied.

Limitations

This study presents several limitations requiring consideration when interpreting results:

Design limitations: The cross-sectional design provides a snapshot of perceptions at a specific moment but does not allow longitudinal changes in attitudes or consumption patterns. Longitudinal studies are necessary to understand how perceptions evolve as students mature or as the platform itself evolves.

Sampling limitations: Non-probabilistic convenience sampling limits generalization of results. Participants may not represent broader university populations, and self-selection biases may have influenced sample composition. Students with more liberal attitudes toward OnlyFans may have been more willing to participate. Future research should employ larger, more representative samples with probabilistic sampling methods.

Instrument limitations: The questionnaire was relatively simple, with dichotomous or simple choice questions that do not capture complexity and nuances of OnlyFans perceptions. Critical variables—gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic level, religiosity, political ideology—were not evaluated, all of which likely influence attitudes. The instrument lacked validation procedures or established reliability measures. Future studies should develop validated instruments with established psychometric properties.

Analytical limitations: The study did not delve into motivations behind consumption or non-consumption, reasons for moral acceptance or rejection, or specific experiences of those who know content creators. Analysis was predominantly descriptive without deeper statistical examinations of relationships between variables. Future qualitative research could provide richer understandings of these phenomena.

Contextual limitations: The study was conducted in a specific context not detailed in the methodology. Attitudes toward OnlyFans may vary according to regional cultural, religious, and social factors. Results may not be applicable to contexts with more conservative cultural norms or different economic structures. Comparative studies across different contexts would enhance understanding of cultural variations.

Content type limitations: The study did not differentiate between types of OnlyFans content. The platform hosts non-sexual content (fitness, cooking, etc.) in addition to adult content. This distinction could be relevant for understanding perceptions and consumption patterns.

Knowledge depth limitations: The depth of "knowledge" of OnlyFans was not evaluated. Knowing the platform's name does not necessarily equate to understanding its operation, business model, or social implications. Future research should assess knowledge depth rather than mere awareness.

Future Research Directions

Future research should:

1. Employ larger, more representative samples with probabilistic sampling methods

2. Utilize mixed methodologies combining quantitative analyses with in-depth qualitative interviews
3. Implement longitudinal designs capturing attitude changes over time
4. Explore gender differences in perceptions and consumption patterns
5. Investigate specific motivations of consumers and creators through qualitative methods
6. Examine OnlyFans use impact on interpersonal relationships and psychological well-being
7. Develop and validate comprehensive instruments with established psychometric properties
8. Conduct cross-cultural comparisons to understand contextual variations
9. Differentiate between types of content consumed and created
10. Assess depth of platform knowledge beyond mere awareness

CONCLUSION

This exploratory study provides empirical evidence that OnlyFans has achieved extraordinary cultural penetration among university students in Spanish-speaking contexts. Key findings indicate that 93% of students know the platform, 30% have purchased content, 70% do not consider its use morally objectionable, and 50% personally know content creators. These results suggest OnlyFans has transitioned from marginal phenomenon to integrated element in the cultural landscape of young university students.

The findings reflect broader generational changes in attitudes toward sexuality, digital sex work, and creator economy. The normalization of OnlyFans among university students has important implications for educators, policymakers, and mental health professionals, who must develop strategies supporting young people navigating these new digital realities.

However, normalization and acceptance should not obscure legitimate concerns about exploitation, digital permanence, psychological well-being, and economic precarity characterizing platform economies. The gap between universal knowledge and moderate consumption, alongside substantial social proximity to creators, raises important questions about how this platform integrates into students' lives and social networks.

This study opens more questions than it closes. Nearly universal familiarity with OnlyFans among university students represents only the starting point for understanding a phenomenon whose ramifications are just beginning to emerge. Transformations in attitudes toward sex work, intimacy, privacy, and digital economy are developing in real time, with current university generations as protagonists of an unprecedented social experiment.

Continuous research is required to fully understand individual and social implications of platforms like OnlyFans, as well as balanced regulatory frameworks protecting digital workers without restricting freedoms. Future research employing more rigorous methodologies, larger samples, and mixed methods approaches will be essential for advancing understanding of this evolving phenomenon and its impacts on contemporary youth culture.

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