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Hollywood struggles to portray sex work with nuance

OnlyFans plotlines should be handled with care, says *Charley Ross*

IT WAS ONLY a matter of time until OnlyFans bled into mainstream pop culture narratives. The online platform, where anyone can share content – and yes, it's largely adult content – to their fee-paying subscribers, now has over 370m users. As a phenomenon it's a zeitgeisty nexus of sex, capitalism and internet intrigue, too ripe for contemporary storytellers to ignore.

For *Euphoria* showrunner Sam Levinson, it was inevitable that OnlyFans would be a plot point in season three. Already we've had Sydney Sweeney's Cassie creating content, dressed first as a dog, in a collar and

lead, and then sporting pigtails while sucking on a pink pacifier and wearing a diaper. The show's voiceover remarks she is 'so desperate for attention she's willing to humiliate herself'.

Levinson is, of course, well-known for his shock value, but the scenes have been lambasted by critics as symptomatic of *Euphoria's* 'celebration of female degradation' – as well as portraying sex work in a sensationalist way that dehumanises both the characters and real-life sex workers who

want to see themselves depicted as fully-fleshed out people on screen. Levinson, for his part, told *The Hollywood Reporter* that they intended for Cassie's OnlyFans storyline to feel 'absurd' and 'depressing'.

In contrast, the reception to Apple TV's new drama *Margo's Got Money Troubles* – starring Elle Fanning, Michelle Pfeiffer and Nicole Kidman, and adapted from the novel by Ruffi Thorpe – has been praised for its more well-rounded, non-judgmental portrayal of this particular type of sex work.

Margo (played by Fanning) falls pregnant and joins OnlyFans as a means to make money to support herself and her child – but the series explores the wider context of her life, the socio-economic motivations behind her choice, and how the character is inspired by her father's wrestling career in creating her OnlyFans persona.

Fanning has explained that she and members of the writing team set up OnlyFans accounts to better understand how the platform actually works, as well as the people who use it for work. The series doesn't shy away from the stigma that surrounds sex work, and touches on how it affects Margo's relationships with her family and friends and even the custody of her child. But it also shows us the fullness of Margo's life, and her playfulness and creativity while creating content.

In this year's Women's Prize longlisted novel *The Benefactors* by Wendy Erskine, the teenage Misty uses a 'cam girl' site similar to OnlyFans to top up her income while she dreams of being a special effects make-up artist. Her experience of cam work is described in humorous terms, something she doesn't find traumatic. But when Misty is sexually assaulted at a party, this side hustle is weaponised against her, reflecting an injustice sex workers can face.

As an increasing number of women join the platform to make money (women now make up an estimated 84% of the approximately 4m creators on there), depicting OnlyFans as a form of sex work in a way that is both authentic and thoughtful may not be straightforward, but it is important. Far from being a titillating punchline at the expense of women, it's a topic that deserves to be explored with intelligence, humanity and, yes, humour, but, above all, nuance.

Sydney Sweeney
as Cassie in
Euphoria