

OnlyFans and young people: exploitation or empowerment?

A report by VoiceBox



Earnings		Payments		Amount	Fee	Net	Status
08-15-16	4:29 AM	Subscription	\$ 9.99	\$ 2.00	\$ 7.99	PENDING	
08-15-16	2:17 AM	Re-Subscription	\$ 9.99	\$ 2.00	\$ 7.99	PENDING	
08-14-16	22:04 PM	Subscription	\$ 9.99	\$ 2.00	\$ 7.99	COMPLETE	
08-14-16	20:58 PM	Tip	\$ 50.00	\$ 10.00	\$ 40.00	COMPLETE	
08-14-16	20:51 PM	Re-Subscription	\$ 9.99	\$ 2.00	\$ 7.99	COMPLETE	
08-14-16	18:01 PM	Tip	\$ 25.00	\$ 5.00	\$ 20.00	COMPLETE	
08-14-16	16:54 PM	Subscription	\$ 9.99	\$ 2.00	\$ 7.99	COMPLETE	
08-14-16	14:42 PM	Subscription	\$ 9.99	\$ 2.00	\$ 7.99	COMPLETE	
08-14-16	12:11 PM	Re-Subscription	\$ 9.99	\$ 2.00	\$ 7.99	COMPLETE	
08-14-16	9:30 AM	Re-Subscription	\$ 9.99	\$ 2.00	\$ 7.99	COMPLETE	
08-14-16	6:01 AM	Subscription	\$ 9.99	\$ 2.00	\$ 7.99	COMPLETE	

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CONTENTS

Introduction to VoiceBox	3
Introduction to the report	3
Introduction to OnlyFans	4
Recent developments	4
Methodology	5
Content creators – positive views	6
Content creators – negative views	9
Subscribers – positive views	15
Subscribers – negative views	18
Observers' views	20
Users of other in-stream payment services	23
Conclusion	25

Introduction to VoiceBox

We created VoiceBox to give young people's voices a boost.

More often than not, young people are left out of the conversation. At worst, products and policies are informed by best guesses about what young people want and need – with no young person sitting at the table at all. At best, young people are 'consulted' in some fashion, but it's rare to see them at the heart of the decision-making process.

Often, young people are having conversations of their own about the exact topics these organisations want to understand. These conversations happen in unique ways, in various digital spaces – but they often aren't seen, or taken seriously.

Celebrating the fact that our team at VoiceBox consists of members on both sides of the Atlantic, we cover global topics by listening to young people's voices across the world.

We introduce organisations to the young people whose voices they need – and help them make better products and services together. Everything we do is *led* by young people, *for* young people.

That creates a gap - between the lived experiences of young people and the policies, products and services that we consume. Through our content platform, our Ambassadors and our research, we are creating spaces where young people can genuinely express themselves – without getting lost in the noise.

Find out more: voicebox.site

Introduction to the report

This research was commissioned by Parent Zone – the experts in digital family life. They came to us with a question: 'what are the platforms we should be worried about?'. We told them that OnlyFans, with its in-stream payment functionality, and associations with sex work, should be at the top of the list. The following report explains what OnlyFans is, why young people are using it and what the risks are.

If you have a question for us, please get in touch: all@youth-zone.com



01

Introduction to OnlyFans

OnlyFans is a UK-based content subscription service which was founded in 2016. Creators are paid directly for content and receive 80% of the profits, whilst the platform takes 20% – a significantly lower cut than many similar services in the offline and online worlds.

Creators can choose to monetise their pictures and videos by selling them to subscribers for a monthly fee, or make content freely viewable. They are also able to offer additional services, such as private messaging and personalised photos and videos that can be agreed as a one-time tip or pay-per-view feature.

Although OnlyFans hosts and encourages a variety of content including fitness experts, make-up artists, musicians and graphic designers, it has become increasingly popular with sex workers. Due to the relative ease and accessibility of the platform – and the perception that it's possible to make 'easy money' through soft porn – many people who weren't sex workers before have decided to create x-rated OnlyFans accounts.

Recent developments

The platform boomed in popularity during 2020 and by December boasted 90 million users – as well as more than one million content creators, up from 120,000 in 2019. Numerous factors could be responsible for this, including a wider trend towards in-stream payment sites and the economic impact of Covid-19 on young people.

Media coverage of OnlyFans increased drastically in 2020 and was predominantly shrouded in negative connotations and backlash. Back in January 2020, 20-year-old Kaylen Ward offered nude photos to anyone who donated funds to combat the Australian wildfires – and raised \$1 million in the process. Her actions brought the platform to the public eye, encouraging heated debates around its controversial approach.

In August 2020, American actress Bella Thorne made over \$2 million on OnlyFans in just one week by charging her subscribers \$200 for nude photos of herself and then failing to provide them. This sparked a backlash, particularly from sex workers on the platform, as they felt celebrities with existing audiences had an unfair advantage and would take business away from them. Subscribers who paid for the photos felt scammed and pressured OnlyFans into changing its payment policies.



OnlyFans obliged, capping charges at \$50 per photo and increasing payment waiting times from seven to thirty days.

In November 2020, The New York Post ‘doxxed’ (revealed the identity of) a 23-year-old medic who had recently joined OnlyFans to supplement her income, reaching out to her employer and revealing personal information without permission. This story provoked huge debates on the privacy rights of online sex workers and shone a light on the complicated reasons why people might choose to create content on OnlyFans – including financial survival during a global pandemic.

Methodology

These examples of OnlyFans in the news highlight the controversy and negativity surrounding the site. However, these conversations often develop with minimal input from young people, who make up a considerable proportion of the users and content creators. With the platform only expected to rise in popularity this year, we decided to explore how young people actually perceive and interact with the site, in all its complexity.

This report focuses on the views and opinions of content creators, users and observers. We also explore other in-stream payment sites in an effort to understand why people are drawn to this emerging financial model.

We mainly carried out our research through opinion-gathering on online platforms such as Reddit and Twitter, as well as selected quotes from existing articles covering the topic. All statements have been anonymised to protect the identity of those involved.

The report outlines what attracts both content creators and users to the platform, as well as the negative and positive outcomes of interacting with the site. Themes include financial gains and losses, age-verification challenges, authenticity, sexual empowerment vs objectification, and short-term gains vs long-term consequences.

As a large amount of content on OnlyFans is sexual, we have decided to place considerable attention on sex work and the physical and psychological impact that has on both users and content creators.



02

Content Creators – positive views

With over one million content creators on OnlyFans, there is a wide range of reasons for joining. The diversity of these reasons only adds to the complexity of the platform. Young content creators in particular speak about a range of physical and psychological benefits which we outline below.

Financial reward and positive recognition

Perhaps the most obvious incentive is the financial reward and positive recognition from subscribers. Although OnlyFans takes a 20% cut, this is a small percentage compared to similar services which often demand as much as 50%.

As a result, creators report they are able to take ownership of their work and have the potential to make more money than they ever have before. On Reddit and Twitter, posts from OnlyFans creators who bought their own houses with subscriber money regularly go viral.

“Gradually, my account grew in popularity. From the compliments to the cash, I was loving it. I made \$300 the next month. \$1000 after that. Then \$1500. At my peak, I earned \$2500 in a month.”

“[Thanks to OnlyFans] I have more money than I know what to do with.”

Some creators were merely intrigued by the platform and continue to see the financial reward as a nice addition to their regular wages.

“My choice to create an OnlyFans account was not out of necessity, but mostly out of curiosity and a desire to make a little extra cash during Covid, so I could pay off some bills and save enough to move out of my parents’ house.”



Others depend on the money they generate from the platform for their livelihoods. For many of these content creators, the importance of OnlyFans income has only been increased by the financial impact of Covid and limited job opportunities – like the 23-year-old medic mentioned previously. Many young people – particularly those with precarious part-time work in hospitality and retail – are turning to OnlyFans to survive and support families.

“This is the first year I didn’t have to choose between the electric bill and Christmas presents for my kids.”





Greater control over content

Many content creators feel that in-stream payment platforms like OnlyFans enable them to be more 'in control' of their work, because they can cultivate an audience that is already interested in the content they want to produce.

"[I use OnlyFans because] I want clients that know me and accept me."

Due to the ability to interact with one another directly, some content creators report that OnlyFans feels more 'intimate' or 'personal' than similar platforms. Creators are able to receive positive feedback more easily, often without it being mediated by an employer, and develop an audience seemingly invested in the continuation and success of their work.

"I'm [uploading content to OnlyFans] because I enjoy talking with my followers."

Boosting confidence and exploring sexuality

For many young people, OnlyFans is a space where they can share sexual content on their own terms. In addition to financial rewards and a greater sense of control, many content creators report positive emotional outcomes from using the platform.

"I never thought anyone would pay to see me naked. It's been a confidence boost."

As endorsements such as this spread, online sex work can become normalised or seen as something worth 'trying out'.

"A lot of girls with backgrounds similar to mine seem to be dabbling in online sex work, particularly on OnlyFans."

Many young women in particular see creating content on OnlyFans as a way of exploring their sexuality. Some report that validation from others gives them the confidence to try new things and learn more about their own likes and dislikes.

"When I was 20, I dabbled in online sex work (camgirl/OnlyFans type stuff) for around a year. I was lonely, insecure and sexually inexperienced (I had only lost my virginity a few months before because I had always been so shy around men) and I wanted validation and also an outlet for my sexual frustration."

Further to this, creators report that OnlyFans allows them to challenge and even overcome societal taboos about female sexuality – a process which can be empowering for many young women. Many feel that this allows them to take ownership of their bodies and even take advantage of the 'male gaze' by profiting from it.

"[Because of OnlyFans] I spent so much time masturbating and I felt good about it because I felt like I was empowering myself as a woman and embracing my sexuality."



03

Content Creators – negative views

In addition to these perceived benefits, many young people also share criticisms of OnlyFans which both confirm and complicate the controversies covered in the media.

Below we explore several negative consequences reported by content creators.

Difficult working conditions and low likelihood of success

Uploading soft porn to OnlyFans is often seen as ‘easy money’ and not a ‘real job’ – but content creators problematise that narrative and report that attracting and maintaining subscribers requires considerable time and energy.

Many work longer hours than previous jobs, feel pressure to make enough money and find it hard to ‘switch off’ from the platform. Satisfying their subscribers, they say, begins to feel like a duty.

“It’s a full-time job on top of your full-time job looking for work.”

“I hated that I had an obligation to be posting and networking with other creators constantly.”

“The idea that people are just going to open up an OnlyFans account and start raking in the dough is really misguided.”

We did not find any evidence from young content creators that the high threshold for success on OnlyFans pushed them to make more ‘extreme’ content, but this is a theme we would be keen to explore in future reports.

Often the most successful content creators are models and celebrities who already have large social media followings – such as Bella Thorne. They are able to use other online platforms, such as Instagram and Snapchat, to drive followers to their OnlyFans accounts by offering exclusive content at a cost.

The average creator has to gain subscribers one by one, constantly producing content whilst following up with anyone who engages with their work. As a result, creators report that the rewards do not always match the time and effort spent – particularly during periods of financial difficulty, like the coronavirus pandemic.



“Fans want to see you posting daily. You’re always churning. You’re always taking pictures to post.”

“I hated making content in the thick summer heat. I started to get migraines from looking at a screen for hours on end (2/3 of the job consisted of promoting on Twitter and Reddit).”

“The industry is oversaturated and competitive, especially since covid and lots of people losing jobs.”

Protecting privacy and safety

Despite the mutual dependency between content creators and their audience, many of the former feel the need to take additional precautions to protect their privacy and safety on OnlyFans – especially if they primarily post sexual imagery.

“For me, [being safe] meant not showing my face in any content, creating a new email address, using two step verification and completely different passwords everywhere, covering all my tattoos with body tape, and making sure that I didn’t take any photos in recognizable places such as my street, my garden where you could see the houses around me etc.”

Some creators must also accept the possibility of users ‘capping’ (screenshotting and redistributing) content – or even ‘doxxing’ them (revealing their identity). Creators reported leaks and unwanted messages as normal, inevitable consequences of using the platform.

“Before starting on OnlyFans, you have to be aware that no matter what you do, your content can get leaked and people will try to reveal your identity.”

“I got tired of reading all the creepy DMs from both randos on Twitter and paying subscribers.”



Insufficient age verification

Content creators are required to provide a selfie headshot with their ID visible to prove their identity and age.

However, underage content creators can easily navigate around this process by using fake IDs. Once their age has been verified and they are granted access to the platform, there's nothing stopping a user from uploading explicit content of anyone – including children.

“A single ID picture doesn't cut it. IDs can be convincingly altered with fucking Facetune. Plus, even if an adult signs up with a valid ID, they can upload all sorts of content featuring other people who are not age verified on the platform.”

Other creators speak about online pimps, disguised as ‘promoters’ and ‘managers’, who actively prey upon young girls on various social media platforms to encourage them to produce content on OnlyFans.

“They usually approach the model on Twitter and groom her so that she will agree to let them help ‘manage’ her online presence in exchange for a cut. People are desperately naive and they fall for it. This naturally creates a perfect opportunity for blackmail and other types of emotional manipulation. It happens all the time. And it isn't talked about nearly enough in the online sex work community.”

Creators also explained that some teenage girls are drawn to the platform by the possibility of making ‘easy money’ – even if they are too young to start legally producing content. This, they argue, is facilitated by the normalisation of soft porn among adults.

“I have seen SO many 16, 17-year-old girls on Twitter and TikTok talking about how they ‘can't wait until they turn 18’ to create an OnlyFans. It's really depressing, but far more disturbing is the fact that you look at their replies and see a ton of adults encouraging them to do so because, again, “sex work is work!”

“The girls waiting to turn 18 trend so they can create an OnlyFans is disturbing. I see some ‘Just turned 18 nudes’ get upvoted to the top page on Reddit & the comments make me sick.”



Low self-worth

The majority of content creators consulted for this research cite negative psychological impacts from creating content on OnlyFans.

Some explained that after their initial excitement wore off, they began to place too much value on their perception by others – especially men. Many reported that as a result of this change, they felt more self-conscious and less confident than before.

“I started to hate the attention; it made me sort of narcissistic and hyper-aware of my appearance at all times, which had never been typical for me.”

“I could no longer look at my naked body in the mirror without thinking about it as something to be consumed by other people, even if only in photographs and videos.”

“In the end, you’ll place your self worth and value based on how males view you. Your income will be determined on how desirable you are towards the male gaze.”



Problematising the sexual empowerment narrative

Many content creators, especially those who have created explicit content in the past, challenge the idea that OnlyFans is a tool for sexual empowerment.

Some argue that OnlyFans shouldn't be romanticised, as producing content on the platform is still a job that requires hard work.

“There is nothing empowering about showing your body to people for money. It's a job, for Christ's sake – it's no more empowering than working at a grocery store.”

Others claim that creators have to appear empowered and enthusiastic, or risk losing business.

“OnlyFans creators by-and-large claim to love what they do. I have no doubt that this is true in many cases. But I also have no doubt that many creators are just saying that because they have to in order to retain their subscribers.”

Some go as far as to say that, far from being sexually empowering, OnlyFans and online sex work is difficult, dangerous and far too normalised.

“I feel like I'm going to be attacked for saying that I don't think sex work is good. It's mentally painful for anyone who does it, no matter how you try to paint it, and it's depressing. We live in a reality where it's not only okay, it's encouraged!”

Some content creators report that the long-term harms – including to reputation, safety and wellbeing – can outweigh and outlast any initial gains.

“Online sex work is no joke. It can have all sorts of serious consequences, ranging from reputation damage to doxxing and stalking to general trauma caused by any number of factors.”



Expanding on the issue of long-term harms, creators who produced sexual content reported that the platform had distorted not just their view on themselves but also of sex in general. Many struggled to separate their online life from their real-life sexual relationships. Some felt that, because they joined the platform at such a young age, they hadn't fully appreciated the impact that creating porn would have upon their lives.

"I felt alienated from my own sexuality. It was draining. I felt gross. I wasn't happy."

"I didn't realise that I was developing a dependency on porn and specific fetishes based on that. After camming for a few months though and conditioning myself to masturbate to pornographic content on a daily basis I began to need it."

"I'm not ashamed or regretful of my past as a cam girl but I DO regret being so naïve about what porn was doing to my brain."



04

Subscribers – positive views

OnlyFans currently boasts over 90 million users. This section of the report explores why young people are drawn to the platform – in their own words.

Quality over quantity

A major selling point for OnlyFans users is the ability to curate what they see. Through the subscription model, many report that OnlyFans allows them to seek out quality content – sexual or otherwise – far more easily than bigger platforms with more content creators.

“It’s not about ‘quantity’, but rather quality.”

“Tracking down specific content on those [other] sites takes forever. Aside from my desire to support the performers, I don’t mind paying the few bucks [on OnlyFans] for the convenience of having easy access.”

Users report that OnlyFans allows for a more intimate and exclusive experience than bigger platforms, particularly because so many OnlyFans creators are ordinary people with small, dedicated audiences rather than professionals.

“I don’t particularly like ‘pro’s’ as it all seems so fake, and this person seemed very genuine.”

“The guys I’ve subscribed to [on OnlyFans] are exactly the kind of guys I’m attracted to, and it’s hard to find guys who look like them on commercial sites.”

Some users feel invested in their favourite creators – especially those they had followed before the advent of OnlyFans – and enjoyed using OnlyFans to support them directly and invest in their journey.

“I feel good about subscribing on OF because I know that 80% of my money is going straight to the performer himself, which enables him to make a living off his work, instead of lining some sleazy producer’s pocket.”



“Porn is not meaningfully different from other entertainment media, and I am generally happy to pay for content. I pay for Spotify, Netflix, a couple newspapers, and some software subscriptions that I use because I want to support these creators and institutions. Beyond that, a \$5-10 porn subscription is cheaper than one drink at a bar, and it brings me a lot more enjoyment.”

“I followed a Redditor [on OnlyFans] a while ago, basically threw \$10 at it, and considered it a donation for content I had been enjoying for free, as it seemed like they really enjoyed what they were doing.”

“They had a tough time at the end of their Reddit days, and I wanted to try and support them coming off Reddit and onto OF. They were nice, and I DM’d with them a couple of times about some of their struggles on Reddit.”

Tailored sexual content

Young people also point to OnlyFans as a platform that allows them to find tailored sexual content – including fetishes that might be considered niche. Although mainly free, porn sites are overloaded with content to cater for a broad audience. In contrast, users report, OnlyFans makes it easier for them to find exactly what they want in no time at all as they can ‘rely’ on the quality of the accounts they follow.

“If you have a particular fetish/fantasy and there are a few pornstars who just make videos on it. It’s so tempting to just pay for their OnlyFans and you get a whole array of vids for that one thing.”

“Eventually you want the new shit when you want it, and want to cut out the time searching for it by simply paying.”

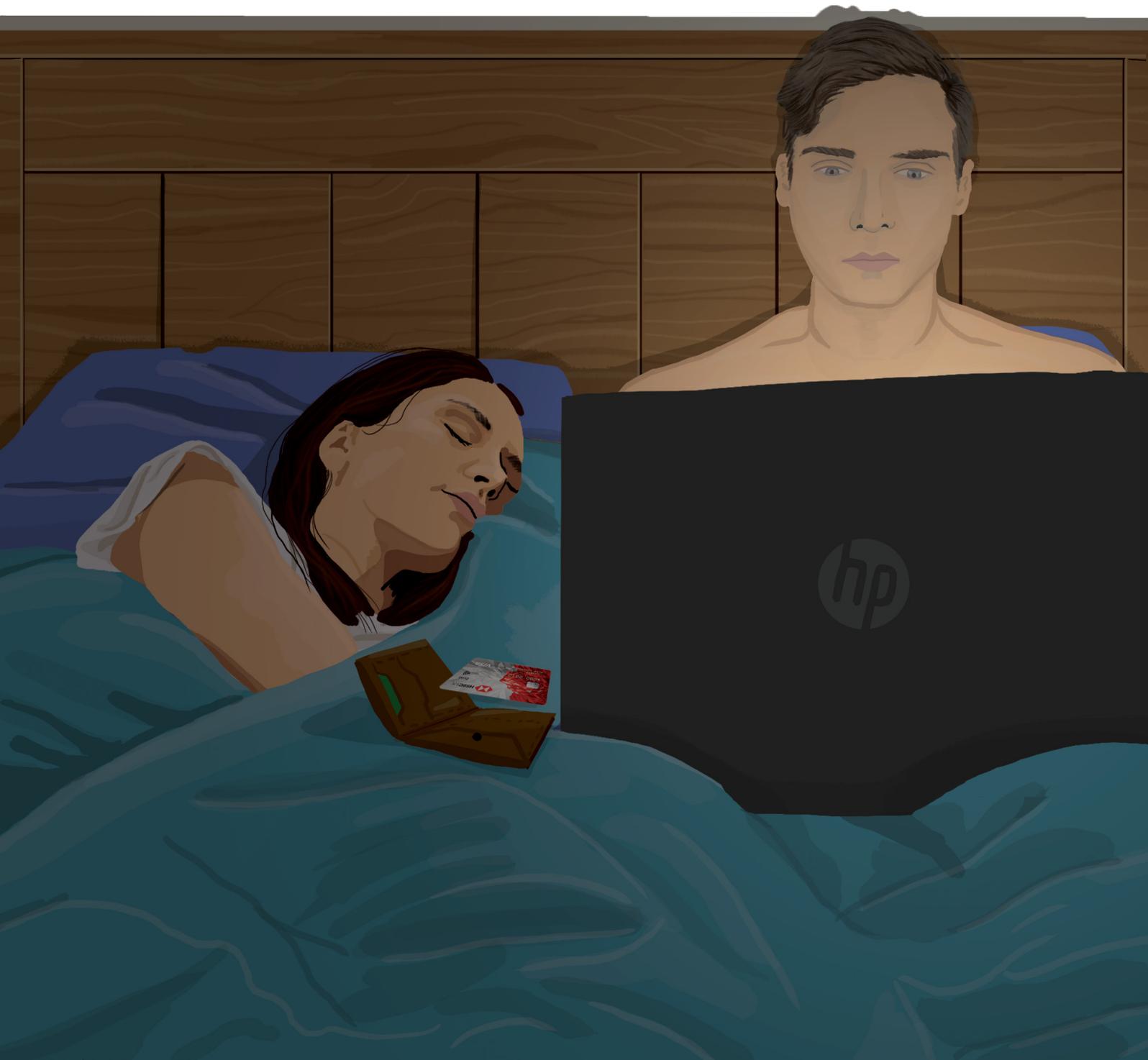
Others point to the fact that many of the people who create sexual content on OnlyFans are ordinary women who feel more relatable, approachable and real compared to pornstars – and some went so far as to suggest that this speaks to positive changes in the consumption of porn.

“Onlyfans did something unprecedented, porn was majorly free but people are tired of staged shows. They want something personal and something intimate.”

“I think it’s partially that we want to see the ‘girl next door’ type of person.”



We see this as part of a wider trend among young people away from the artifice associated with mainstream culture – photoshop, filters and airbrushing in films, fashion and adverts – towards ‘real life’ depictions of people (which nevertheless require their own kind of editing and, in that sense, are no more ‘authentic’.)





05

Subscribers – negative views

OnlyFans addiction

Some users report becoming so dependent on OnlyFans – and so desperate to access more bespoke content from their favourite creators – that they describe their relationship with the platform as an ‘addiction’.

“OnlyFans is like a fetish and your dopamine can’t get it from pornhub.”

Impact on finances

Like other kinds of addiction, some users explained that moderate use quickly developed into an expensive habit that required disproportionate spending – but by the time they realised, it was too late.

“When you want to see more of that individual, you’ll become desperate and start paying to see more of their content.”

Impact on sexual relationships

Users report that some of their peers are so eager to interact with creators that it makes them vulnerable, or worthy of sympathy.

“I’m mostly sorry for the boys who are so desperate for female attention”

“[OnlyFans is a scam because] the simple minded or desperate of heart are simply used for their money. They are fooled into thinking it actually helps them [to find partners] when in the end they are losing money that could be used elsewhere, and it is not healthy for them mentally.”

They imply that regular exposure to explicit content on OnlyFans distorts these users’ views on sex, as well as having a negative impact on their relationships.

One girl explained that her boyfriend has an OnlyFans account which was causing strains in their relationship. Although she was initially comfortable with him having an account, she became annoyed and upset at how much he was spending on not only his subscriptions but also gifts for his favourite creators when they were struggling financially as a couple.



“He was spending approx \$450 a month on subscriptions, but he has cut back after I spoke to him about just how financially alarming his behaviour was.”

“He got her a Christmas gift, but not me, his actual girlfriend. While I have come to terms with his use of the service, this has really upset me because for the first time these women he subscribes to have broken the third wall and entered my reality.”

Indeed, the prevalence of ‘next door’-style sex workers on OnlyFans may have the potential to affect users’ expectations more than traditional porn, where there is a clear distinction between fantasy and reality. Some users feel that the lower production value actually signifies authenticity.

“I greatly prefer amateur porn because the professionally filmed and edited studio stuff does nothing for me. I enjoy an adequately-lit iPhone shot of two guys genuinely enjoying themselves a lot more than a professionally shot video of two porn actors grunting for theatrical effect.”

“I think OnlyFans is a lot more intimate than regular porn, it’s like some sort of paid gf experience.”

“OnlyFans is like the perfect messy haircut – it looks like you’ve just got out of bed, but it’s not ‘effortless’ at all. It took hours to perfect. And while I totally agree that airbrushing and all that stuff is bad, it’s equally dangerous to see this as natural. It isn’t – it’s just a different kind of artificial.”

This more ‘intimate’ experience is potentially more popular in a global pandemic, during which people are less able to pursue or experience romantic and sexual relationships face to face.



06

Observers' views

We were keen to ascertain whether young people's views of OnlyFans as content creators and users would be echoed by observers. The following section of this report explores the perspectives of family, friends and members of the general public.

Problematising the sexual empowerment narrative

Like content creators, many observers problematise the narrative that OnlyFans is sexually empowering for young women.

Some go as far as to argue the opposite. They feel that the platform encourages young women to sexualise themselves for men and base their value on their appearance, while convincing them they are being empowered.

“OF is peak patriarchy and libfem ideology. Women willingly turning themselves into objects for men's direct consumption and calling it 'empowering'.”

Others speak about the dangers of the 'sex positivity' movement in relation to OnlyFans – and feel that sexual empowerment narratives are simplistic and naive, given the power structures that inform sex work.

“The majority of people perpetuating sex positivity in the name of feminism are ignorant to how complicated sex and sexuality is, and almost willfully ignorant of the social inequalities that prevent their notion of sex positivity from being empowering.”

Alongside this, observers note that creators sometimes struggle to separate their OnlyFans work from their personal life – and are forced to fulfil an exploitative role as their online persona. Some see this as a particular problem for OnlyFans, compared to offline sex work.

“We often see girls getting like 300k a month but that's only the top like 1 percent. The rest of them are getting minimum wage for exploitative work. Definitely not worth it.”



“At least escorts are allowed to separate their personal lives from their sex work... OnlyFans promotes the ‘girlfriend experience’ as part of the package, so these women are forced to play the part of ‘hot girl who actually responds positively to your creepy DMs and eggplant emoji comments.’”



Protecting privacy and safety

Like content creators, many observers are concerned that young girls are being actively encouraged to set up OnlyFans accounts and sell explicit content. Some feel the online world justifies these behaviours – which they consider to be grooming – and argue they would not be tolerated in the offline world.

“Encouraging young men and women to make an OnlyFans as soon as they turn 18 is essentially grooming and is abhorrent.”

“I see lots of girls saying ‘I can’t wait till 18 to start an OnlyFans’ and lots of people reply with encouraging messages. In a real life interaction, if you talked to a 17 year old with the intention of getting nudes, and as soon as they turned 18 and asked for nudes, it would be grooming undoubtedly. But if you encourage someone to sell their nudes as soon as they’re 18 and buy them then it’s perfectly fine? Seems predatory to me.”



Is OnlyFans real work?

Many challenge the idea that OnlyFans is real work and encourage creators to get a 'real job'.

During our research, we found several social media groups established in opposition to 'e-thots' (a derogatory term for online sex workers). These groups argued that OnlyFans content creators were hypocritical since they didn't pay sufficient taxes, yet wanted their work to be taken seriously.

In, the US, more extreme members of these groups make it their mission to report known sex workers to their employers and even the Internal Revenue Service, in an effort to get them dismissed or investigated by federal authorities. When successful, these members post proudly about 'taking down' another 'e-thot', as if it is a public service or moral mission.

However, others defend OnlyFans creators for their hard work. They note that it is difficult to produce plentiful content of high quality and gain loyal followers – and compare OnlyFans to other kinds of online work, which receive less criticism.

"It's not as easy and as simple as many men make it up to be. So stop pretending you would be a millionaire if only you were a woman."

"Those women post a dozen pictures of themselves each day, every day per week, in two dozen subreddits. I can't even get myself to look good on one picture, let alone when I'm naked, and then hundreds of times per month, each just different enough to capture an audience. It sounds exhausting and terrifying, not easy."

"If women only have to take their clothes off for OnlyFans, to become millionaires, then guys just have to play video games on YouTube to become millionaires too. See how easy it is?"



07

Users of other in-stream payment services

More young people than ever before are turning to in-stream payment services in pursuit of specific content. These services include:

- Twitch
- Patreon
- YouTube memberships
- Live-streaming and tip jars on Reddit
- Individual content creators on their own websites

Many are drawn to these services because they believe that the content is worth the price. They are able to pay for content from specific creators whose work they like and value. And as with OnlyFans, they feel they can build up a kind of relationship with the creator and become part of a special community.

Supporting creators financially so that they can remain ‘independent’ – and continue to express themselves freely – is a major factor behind young people’s use of in-stream payment services.

“I find myself motivated to pay for content when it ties to a bigger goal that I believe in. For example, I subscribe to an organisation whose mission is to create independent media in the UK, outside of corporate-owned newspapers. The £15 that comes out of my account every month doesn’t get me anything other than the sense that I’m helping to further a cause. Subscribers like me are what keeps their project afloat – and in a way, that feels more like crowdfunding than subscribing.”



However, despite a noticeable increase in in-stream payment services, the majority of young people are happy to consume content for free – especially as it is so readily available, either from the content creators themselves (for example, via regular YouTube feeds) or on third-party websites designed to circumvent paywalls.

“Like OnlyFans, a lot of the big subscription sites encourage people to dip into their pockets using incentives – like exclusive content. For some reason, that has never convinced me, even though I follow a lot of YouTubers and podcasters who use Patreon etc. and strongly believe they should be able to make a living off their art. Maybe growing up bombarded by ads numbs your ears to genuine calls for support – or maybe I am just selfish and prefer free stuff!”

Although it is beyond the scope of this report, we are interested in how the rise of crowdfunding in the previous two decades relates to the prevalence of the in-stream payment model today. While they both appear to be reactions to an internet that arguably gave creators insufficient compensation for content – and both aim to personalise what is essentially a business transaction – they also have key differences. Most notably, the concept of ‘chipping in’ and realising a project together is very different from an individuals’ obligation to pay for content directly.



07

Conclusion

“For every woman funding her dream life on OnlyFans, there are thousands on the platform who struggle to make ends meet, who do it to cope with trauma, who dabble in it without recognizing the long-term consequences of having their intimate photos online forever.”

Our research has revealed a real breadth of perspectives about OnlyFans from young people – whether they are creators, users or observers.

Above all, while many pointed out short-term gains – particularly around money and sexual empowerment – young people tended to be unsure, even suspicious, of OnlyFans and its long-term effects.

Creators, users and observers alike rightly raised questions that have not been sufficiently addressed by the platform – or indeed those who comment upon it. These questions mostly centre around the impacts upon young people’s:

- self-esteem and mental health
- finances and job prospects
- relationships and views on sex.

OnlyFans is a relatively new platform, so perhaps we will only be able to start answering these questions in the next few years. In particular, we are keen to find out how the supposed ‘authenticity’ of OnlyFans – a cornerstone of its popularity – will shape young people’s views of sex, relationships and online content more broadly. As we established above, we see this as part of a wider reaction to ‘over-edited’ content, the full effects of which are yet to be seen.

We hope to see – and, through this report, inspire – new conversations throughout the decade. And we urge that young people aren’t merely consulted in these conversations, but invited to lead them.



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