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Head: OnlyFans: behind the screens

Sell: Is the NSFW platform doing enough to protect its most vulnerable users? Two women open up about the harmful realities of being a content creator.

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The chances are you have heard of it. Whether it's from Beyoncé's line in the *Savage remix*, or because your friends', mum's, cat's, twice-removed cousin is on there. The platform has become increasingly popular among Gen-Z who have recognised it as a money-making opportunity which has enticed more and more young girls into creating an account.

Although there is a range of content on the site, it is notorious for its pornography. From feet pictures to X-rated videos, there is no denying that the OnlyFans has had a vast impact on the digital landscape and its rising popularity has helped bring sex work to the mainstream. The site has more than one million creators worldwide as of the 1st of January 2021, up from 70,000 creators [in July 2019](#). *The Financial Times* called it "the hottest social media platform in the world" and reported that OnlyFans' revenue grew by 553% in the year to November 2020.

The rising popularity of OnlyFans is primarily due to many of the content creators having shifted over from Instagram or Twitter. Seeing influencers cash in *a lot* (we're talking hundreds, if not, thousands) from the site, young girls - struggling with their own financial issues - decide to do the same. How hard can it be, right?

Setting up an account is quick and painless. A few clicks and you have entered the world of OnlyFans, either as a 'creator' or a 'fan'. Creators are able to upload content for their 'fans' - people paying - to view. On the surface, it appears to be a fast financial fix, yet many don't realise how far this is from the truth, until it is too little too late.

Melissa\*, 19, began posting on the site when she was 16 and still at school, after using a fake ID to set up her account: "At first I didn't think anything of it. I saw so many people on social media doing it so thought why not? When setting up my profile, OnlyFans didn't do any background checks which, now looking back, is extremely dangerous but at the time it didn't cross my mind."

"I didn't tell anyone I was making content. I would sneak up to my bedroom after dinner with my family and take photos of myself when my parents thought I was doing homework."

To be successful on the network, creators need a niche to attract their 'fans' and for Melissa, it was being barely legal: "I started off with underwear photos but quickly switched to full nudes as that is where the money is. Soon after, I realised that there is a large market for underage girls which is pretty f\*cked up, but I took this as an opportunity to profit from."

"It became like an addiction, once I started reaping the rewards, I couldn't stop, I just wanted more and more [money]."

However, for Melissa this lifestyle was too good to be true as she became the victim of a creator's greatest fear: "One morning I woke up to hundreds of missed calls and messages from those close to me. I thought maybe that they had mistakenly thought it was my birthday (which was the following week) - not once did I stop to think this would be about my OnlyFans."

“My account on OnlyFans was like another world to me. It allowed me to express myself in ways I hadn’t before; learning to love myself whilst getting paid to do so. It was at that moment I found out that one of my subscribers had leaked a number of my nudes all over Twitter.”

“They were taken down by Twitter but that didn’t stop people from my school saving and sharing them around. I got suspended, bullied and lost a lot of friends because of it.”

Melissa wants to raise awareness of the harsh reality of the platform and for others to consider her experience before signing up: “It’s an easy way in but no one tells you how you can never escape. I can’t walk around my town without fear that someone is looking at me because they have seen me naked. I would encourage everyone to think twice before making an account.”

As it stands, UK law states that you must be over the age of 18 to sell or distribute explicit content. However, there is no legal requirement or regulation to compel OnlyFans to investigate content on its site for such material. All legal and potential criminal liability lies with the individual who uploads and/or receives/distributes said content.

In a statement to the BBC, OnlyFans said: “We constantly review our systems to ensure they are as robust as possible, to ensure that OnlyFans operates in line with all legislation and guidance. If we are alerted to any underage individual who has gained or tried to gain illegitimate access to the platform, we will always take immediate steps to investigate and suspend the account.”

The site explained how it is always looking to improve the safety of users: “In late May 2019, we introduced an extra safeguard into our account verification process so that a Creator now has to provide us with a ‘selfie’ with their ID in the image in order to prove that the ID provided belongs to the account holder.” Yet, as with all types of pornography, young people, such as Melissa, will innovatively invent new methods to access it despite the implementation of restrictions.

Rebecca Harrison, 27, from Newcastle, is a sex therapist and believes that more education is needed in schools regarding the impacts of leaking pornography: “The emphasis is always on why that person made the content, not why did that person who shared it think it was appropriate to do that. Whether you’re uploading it on OnlyFans or sending a nude to a partner, that’s not a crime, the crime is the people who are sharing it without permission.”

“Society has normalised pornography and OnlyFans part of this culture. We are very quick to judge and stereotype sex workers but there is a huge amount of people that access this pornography. What we don’t focus on is the users of such platforms and what their relationship is with pornography... and it isn’t a healthy one.”

Yet, for some creators, OnlyFans represents a chance to stand proud of your body and embrace sex positively. CeeCee Davine, 23, from North London, is a full-time content creator and has had a largely positive experience on the platform: “Having an OnlyFans has been a very empowering experience. I’ve always been bigger than your average girl but also wasn’t considered plus size. Growing up looking at magazines and advertisements, I never really saw someone who looked like me.”

“I didn’t know where I fit in and thought I was the problem. Doing OnlyFans has taught me to be comfortable in my own skin. It’s changed the way I carry myself and I am a lot more confident.”

Luckily for CeeCee, her content has never been leaked but she was aware of the repercussions when joining the site: “I have received a lot of messages from people threatening to tell my family about

my account. One person messaged me saying: 'I bet your parents are super proud of you, you're a whore'."

"It's a risk you have to take, and I think this is one of the most realistic things people need to take into consideration before working with a platform like this. All it takes is one screenshot to ruin someone's life."

Like many creators, CeeCee thinks the site could do more to protect its users' content from being leaked: "They should make it so people can't screenshot content like they do on online banking apps or Netflix."

"But I don't think OnlyFans would go out of their way to support creators like that. If they allow people to take back their money after seeing content, I don't think they care or even want to protect us."

So perhaps you should think twice if your only plans are to start an OnlyFans. We are all for promoting body confidence and getting that coin sis, but there is a fine line between body positivity and pornography on the platform. This can be particularly harmful for vulnerable young girls who only see the very tip of a potentially detrimental iceberg. From a sex therapist perspective, Rebecca concluded: "What we need to do it to be ready to have those difficult conversations as sex educators and parents around sex work and porn. We can't just ask young people to avoid it when they're exposed to it every day. What we need to do is open a discourse on discussion."

*\*Name changed at interviewees request.*