

After I graduated high school, I deferred from college for a year and got an apartment with my friend Kate. She needed a place to stay, having been kicked out of her mother's house, and I didn't want to start school during the lockdown, so it was the perfect plan. Kate was a waitress but had a large following on her Instagram, where she posted suggestive photos. She might as well get paid for that, she reasoned. Websites like OnlyFans were a godsend for people like Kate, who were freshly legal and living on minimum wage – as well as people who had lost their jobs in the pandemic, or who had already been sex workers and, like the rest of us, had been forced to move online. OnlyFans changed the sex working game, making it not only more easily accessible but apparently safer. Kate jumped on this opportunity without a second thought.

She started slow, assuring my parents as we moved in together that she was only selling “lude” photos online, but things escalated quickly and Kate took every fruitful opportunity that arose. She was able to quit her restaurant job and began dreaming up plans to retire by thirty. It seemed great at first – our friend Alexa and I were always hearing about how much money she was making, how easy it was...The danger of OnlyFans is that it invites any legal adult to make money this way through a simple process. Little consideration is required and at 18, it's hard to grasp the effects becoming a sex worker could have on a person, not only in their career but emotionally.

For a young adult struggling to pay for college or trying to make some extra cash, OnlyFans appears very promising. Creators are free to remain clothed and/or anonymous online. The only catch is that these options don't bring in nearly as much money, so more often than not users end up sacrificing their original conditions. I watched this firsthand as Kate began sending used underwear to strangers, making requested videos from home, and eventually meeting up with these men in person. Additionally, she was becoming increasingly defensive about her work

as rumors about her spread through our hometown. Despite the fact that I'd never spoken a word against it, she began vouching for sex work during unrelated conversations. She constantly bragged about how much money she was making, and how much power she had over these men. And maybe she did have power over them – it just didn't seem like she felt it. Alexa and I often found ourselves nodding along; it seemed like this work was as emotionally taxing as it was physically. Kate would often complain about pains and soreness that were the result of an endless flow of videos demanded of her, or men who were paying to see her. She was tired, and she was making a living being objectified, relying entirely on her physical appearance.

Feeling judged and uncertain, not wanting to be alone, Kate often suggested ways for Alexa and I to get involved, offering to use her platform to get our feet in the door. Alexa took her up on one of these offers, and the two of them made plans with one of Kate's sugar daddies, a middle-aged man named Vinny who seemed to be under the impression that he and Kate were an item. When they returned, they teased me for staying home, saying I "can't take old man dick." Though I agreed, this seemed to be a turning point in my relationship with the two of them: suddenly, I was the outlier of the group. Their rendezvous with Vinny was a regretful experience (if the teasing didn't tell me, Alexa did later), and ultimately was not worth the money they received. Alexa said she spent it quick – on what, she didn't know.

This raised the question, how much can a sex worker really consent, if they're engaging in sexual activity they don't truly want to take part in? They surely can't give the ideally required "enthusiastic yes" to everyone they work with – Kate certainly wasn't. Isn't that the point of the "enthusiastic yes," that anything other than that is a "no"? For a person to give another access to the most intimate parts of their body, allowing them to touch it with an unreciprocated desire – no matter the person's relationship with sex as a concept, this is always a violating act to some

degree. It was affecting Kate's confidence and trust in people, and it seemed to me at age 18 that sex work is inherently traumatizing. In fact, studies have linked sex work to psychopathology and general social health issues – it seems that people who take part in sex work are impacted on a multidimensional level, often losing a sense of self and ability to connect with other people. Additionally, “Studies in the United States and Canada reveal depression symptoms in 68% of these individuals and PTSD symptoms in nearly a third, showing higher rates than in combat veterans” (1). Kate was, apparently, emotionally prepared to be touched this way. This was a decision that she made as a legal adult, but I couldn't help but feel like I was watching my friends participate in something which was deeply self-destructive. For this reason, I began feeling strongly biased against sex work.

I didn't want to have that opinion, so I did some research. The main argument for sex work is often misconstrued. It simply acknowledges the fact that whether it's legal or not, it's going to happen – and so it might as well happen safely. It also advocates for equal treatment by the government, pointing out how sex workers are often refused healthcare and struggle to find housing. They are also at risk of STIs, physical and verbal violence, as well as trafficking – and while these are things that could still happen outside of the context of sex work, one's likelihood of encountering these issues skyrockets within it. At its core, sex work is a dangerous job, but when it's criminalized it's no safer. Workers shouldn't be discriminated against for their choices – and at the end of the day, laws against sex work are laws against bodily autonomy, ironically – but these choices should be well-informed. As sex work became a bigger topic among activists and OnlyFans gained popularity, not enough awareness was spread about the impact this lifestyle could have on a person's health and future. Nobody bothered to broadcast the point that

OnlyFans is a gateway platform, that boundaries are endlessly pushed, and one thing always leads to another.

I was forced to move out of our apartment when my parents found out that Kate was seeing these men in person, and it was revealed by my younger brother that OnlyFans does not protect its creators' privacy: anyone with a high school level knowledge of computers can track where its users are posting from. Even worse, a New York Times article exposed OnlyFans for "inadequate screening for incest, bestiality and child sexual abuse" (2), and described the site as a "pimp." This vital information is not widely known. The discretion and selectiveness used when spreading information about the topic – specifically OnlyFans but in turn, sex work as a whole – made me uneasy.

Eventually I confronted Kate about the way she was treating me, and as a result we no longer talk. But from what I've seen on Instagram and heard from others, she has been trying to escape this loop for years, oscillating between promoting her OnlyFans and publicly advocating against sex work. She has tried on multiple occasions to start small businesses, other online platforms, or work more traditional jobs, but her digital footprint caught up to her at every turn. Even when she returned to waitressing, her managers found her online and used her content against her, causing her to turn back to sex work once again, being her most consistent job. She pleads with her younger followers not to enter the sex working industry, as it's nearly impossible to quit.

The issue of sex work is so much more complex than Kate's story alone, but statistics tell the harrowing story of an unending cycle. While OnlyFans appears to offer a safer alternative to other options in the industry, the site fails to monitor its content and consequently perpetuates the exact issues with the business that it claims to fight. On top of that, it serves quite literally as a

gateway into more risky, hands-on forms of the job. Kate is only part of a percentage, but according to these studies, she is a textbook example of the risks a young adult faces when they put sex work on the table.