



THE ART OF SEDUCTION

Chances are you've scrolled by social media posts of people buying new cars or paying off credit card debt with **earnings** they've made on OnlyFans. If you've ever been tempted to sell your own **risqué content** on the platform (or already have), you're not alone. An increasing number of college students, including some at UM, have turned to **OnlyFans** for extra cash and even to fund their degrees.

words & design_emmalysse brownstein. photo_tiana torkan.

It's midnight on a Thursday and Daphne pokes around her house to make sure she's the only one awake. Nothing but silence in her little brother's room. The kitchen and living room are dark. From the master bedroom comes the best sound: the rumbling snores of her parents. *Finally*. She hurries back to her own room and locks the door, just in case. Underneath her baggy pajamas is a black lace lingerie set. She drags a mirror in front of her bed, stacks up some class textbooks as a phone stand and switches on her portable LED light. The photos she's about to take will help pay for next semester's college tuition.

OnlyFans is a website where creators earn money from users who subscribe to them monthly. Although it wasn't necessarily intended as a place to sell X-rated content when it launched in 2016—other genres includes musicians live-streaming performances and fitness instructors posting workout routines—that is, by and large, what it is known for. It's "the paywall of porn," as *The New York Times* called it in 2019.

The platform has more than 50 million registered users and 700,000 content creators, according to a report from *Variety* last August. And although the top earners include celebrities like Blac Chyna and YouTube personalities like Belle Delphine, anyone 18 and over with Wi-Fi and a camera can make an account. Creators can choose to charge their "fans" anywhere from \$4.99 to \$49.99 a month to view their feed and can get extra "tips" from individual users for special requests. Less precarious than other methods of selling nudes (like sending photos via direct message on social media after an online transaction), OnlyFans acts like a "middleman" of sorts, according to Daphne, the alias that an undergraduate at the University of Miami uses for her account. That's exactly why she started using the platform in June 2019.

"I would post cute pictures in my bikini and things like that," Daphne said about her Twitter account. She said she regularly received direct messages along the lines of "How much?" from random followers. "I thought, 'Well I guess it wouldn't be a dramatic change [to send nude photos] in a sense.'" So she began using apps like PayPal, Venmo and Cash App to accept payments. After a few months on Twitter, she began to notice an increasing number of posts on her timeline about other people's success selling the same content on OnlyFans. That's when she made the switch.

Her account started out with just a handful of subscribers, mostly previous clients from Twitter. She began with photos of herself in lingerie and bikinis, but "branched out" to full nudity and pornographic videos. Within four or five months, she had garnered about 120 subscribers and regularly pocketed about \$1,300 each month (after the 20% OnlyFans keeps). Daphne went on a trip to Spain with her friends in 2019, completely funded by earnings she made on her OnlyFans.

While some of the most subscribed users rake in millions—Bella Thorne, for example, earned \$2 million in her first week on the platform—most don't. Daphne said she has recently "died down" her account, but even so, any extra cash is helpful for college students. Especially during a global pandemic. "It has helped me save up and pay bills," she said. "This is another version of working from home. People are looking for other sources of income, and OnlyFans is definitely a way to do that."

"PEOPLE ASSUME that because you're a sex worker you'll do everything under the sun," said an anonymous UM student. "Sex workers aren't objects. We don't have to do what you want us to just because you asked."

For another UM undergraduate, who preferred to stay completely anonymous, it makes the difference between attending classes and dropping out. The student is financially independent and, besides scholarships and financial aid, pays all personal and educational expenses on her own. In the summer of 2020, she was balancing two jobs to ensure she could pay the next fall's tuition bill. She began selling content via Snapchat, but shifted to OnlyFans at the start of the Fall 2020 semester. She charges a \$10 monthly subscription rate and said that although subscribers fluctuate, about 50 have been around from the very start.

More goes into creating a lucrative OnlyFans than just snapping naked photos once a week before you shower. "There is a lot more to it than people talk about it—there's all these production things," said the anonymous student. "People think if you just post some nudes you'll be fine. But it's a full job and it's a lot of work." Daphne agreed—she said she spends several hours each week planning and creating content to maintain her twice-per-day posting schedule. Although the primary incentive, OnlyFans does more than make the students money—it's empowering. "When I'm taking pictures of myself, I feel good," said Daphne. "It doesn't feel like work most of the time." The anonymous student agreed. "It's a job that really builds your self-confidence," she said. "It's not every day you have 50 people telling you how beautiful you are."

You can make potentially good money and apparently boost your self-esteem from OnlyFans. So why not start an account? For some college students, it's tempting. But privacy—from future employers, family members and



the permanence of the internet—is probably the most common concern. Both of the students operate their OnlyFans accounts under pseudonyms and keep them a secret from their families. “My mom would smite me,” Daphne said with a laugh. She is a commuter student and lives at home with her family. “I create all of my content in my room. It’s kind of like living a double life.” On the other hand, they said they are open about sex work with their close friends, who are supportive. “I know quite a few of my subscribers in person,” the anonymous student said. “So I feel fine in terms of my privacy.”

Even so, they are aware of the potential risks and have seen them firsthand. Sharing content from the platform is unlawful, in accordance with the Terms of Service users agree to on OnlyFans. But, according to Daphne, it still happens quite often. “I know a lot of people in my area and on my Twitter who have been exposed on Reddit and stuff,” she said. “If you want to do OnlyFans, these are the things you can be subject to.” The anonymous student once found out through friends that a boy from her high school had been screenshotting her photos and sharing them. In these instances, according to their website, OnlyFans issues perpetrators “formal takedown notices” against reported copyright violations. “The moment I found out that he had been attempting to distribute it, I brought in an OnlyFans team,” she said. “It got handled within just a few hours.”

Two other University of Miami undergraduates, Lillian and Alex, said they have both considered creating accounts. “I probably would start one if I could assure people I know would not know about it, but that seems like an impossibility,” said Lillian. Alex agreed. “I would not want [my family] to know about my OnlyFans [account] because of the stigma behind sex work and the idea that pornography is unprofessional,” he said.

When it comes to jobs, the anonymous student said that if a potential employer somehow found out about the nature of her account and couldn’t look past it, she might not want to work for them in the first place. “If it really comes down to sex work for them, they might not be the employer for me,” she said. “Because that means they’re willing to throw everything else that I’ve done, all of my qualifications, out the window. So, it might not be worth it to work for them if they’re so narrow-minded.”

Sam Terilli, a media lawyer and professor at UM’s School of Communication, said that he could see this becoming a more prevalent topic in the future in terms of legality. “The discrimination issue is a tough one. If a company turns around and says ‘we aren’t hiring anyone who ever worked in pornography because we’re a family values company,’ that might not be illegal. Not yet.”

Sumita Chatterjee, a lecturer in the Women’s and Gender Studies program at UM, said that if we want to understand why sex work is stigmatized in the first place, we have to look through a historical lens. “Looking at modern times, I would probably trace it to mid-19th and early 20th century discourses on gender roles, where this ideal of the ‘cult of domesticity’ or ‘true womanhood’ was made the norm,” said Chatterjee. “This idea of womanhood placed value on purity, chastity, piety,

submissiveness and domesticity. Women’s ‘true and honorable’ roles were only as mother, daughter, wife—within home and family. These normative structures then cast any woman who worked outside as problematic, and prostitution and sex work were seen as immoral and outside the bounds of ‘respectable’ society.”

So comes the debate: Is sex work—particularly for women—empowering or objectifying? Is making money from lewd photos and videos a way to ‘stick it to the man?’ Or is it just making it harder for women to be thought of as more than sexual beings? A trending movement on social media is #canceporn, where thousands of users have made posts and videos arguing for the elimination of pornography on the internet. Their reasons vary from the dangers of revenge porn to porn addiction and exposure to minors.

Chatterjee said her own position on the topic is conflicted. “I understand that if women go into this profession as fully informed adults, it is their right to do so. However, individual choice aside, the industry and the systems in place (both pornography and sex work) still remain unregulated and deeply misogynistic in the structures as well as content,” she said. “There is tremendous objectification, violence and a particular brand of sex and pornographic images that is sold through these industries which is harmful both to women

and men. In the absence of rigorous sex education in high schools, young boys often access and consume porn, and their understanding of sex, women and what is a healthy sexual relationship is formed often in these viewings and could not be further away from reality.”

The anonymous student refutes the basis of the #canceporn arguments. “They are supplying what people are demanding, so there

isn’t much to be upset about,” she said. “Eliminating OnlyFans or Pornhub or any of these websites isn’t gonna stop anybody, it’s just going to cause people to put themselves in dangerous situations.”

Terilli pointed out that OnlyFans has created, at the very least, a safer medium for this type of content. “If someone is inclined to do that, for whatever reason, it’s probably a whole lot safer to be on the other end of a computer than to be out on the street,” he said.

Both students stressed that not enough people see what they do as a legitimate job. “Sex work is work,” said Daphne. “It’s just another stream of income and I don’t think I should be hyper-sexualized or not taken seriously because I do such a thing. Just the way you do your 9-5, I’m essentially doing a freelance job.”

Think twice before judging, said the anonymous student. “It’s not different than any other job,” she said. “Before you sit there and bash sex workers, your friend could be one. Your sister could be one.”

Education, according to Chatterjee, is the key to dissecting the nuances of sex stigmatization. “The porn industry is not going away any time soon,” she said. “It should be regulated, and there needs to be alternate spaces where discussions on sex education and sexuality are not seen as taboo or immoral, but openly discussed and debated in schools and colleges.”

▶ IN ADDITION to their regular feed content, OnlyFans users can fulfill individual requests from their subscribers with extra “tips.” The strangest request Daphne has ever received? “Someone asked me to shit on camera,” she said. “It was so insane. I don’t think I could ever do that.”

“Sex work is work,” said Daphne. “It’s just another stream of income and I don’t think I should be hyper-sexualized or not taken seriously because I do such a thing. Just the way you do your 9-5, I’m essentially doing a freelance job.” —Daphne, ONLYFANS CREATOR