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 risky 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, Emmalyse Brownstein. photo, Tiana Torkan.

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 coming from the very start.

More goes into creating a lucrative OnlyFans than just snapping nude photos once a week before you shower. “There’s a lot more to it than people talk about—it’s all these production things,” said the anonymous student. “People think if you just post some nude photos 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 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
“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

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 room would smile 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 unknown, 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 screening her photos and sharing them. In these instances, according to their website, OnlyFans issues perpetrators “normal takedown notices” against reported copyright violations. “The moment I found out that he had been attempting to distribute it, I brought it to the OnlyFans team,” she said. “It got handled within just a few hours.”

The Two students at the 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, 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,’” said Sumita Chatterjee, a lecturer in the Women’s and Gender Studies program at UM, school that she wants to understand why sex work is stigmatized in the first place, we have to look through a historical lens. “Looking at modern times, it would probably trace it to mid-19th and early 20th-century discourses on gender roles, where this idea of the ‘conformity of a woman’ or ‘true womanhood’ was made the norm,” said Chatterjee. “This idea of womanhood placed value on purity, chastity, piety, submission and domesticity. Women’s ‘true and honourable’ roles were only as mother, daughter, wife—with 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 body photos ever a way to ‘stick it to the man’? Or is it just making it harder for women to be thought of as more than sex beings? A trending movement on social media is #FakeModels, 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 violence.

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 these arguments. “They are supposing what people are demanding, so there aren’t much to be upset about,” she said. “Eliminating OnlyFans or Pornhub or any of these websites just 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 streets,” he said.

Both students stressed that not enough people see the damage this does. “As a trend you do your 9-5, I’m essentially doing a freelance job.”

— 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.”

The Two students at the 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, 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, school that she wants to understand why sex work is stigmatized in the first place, we have to look through a historical lens. “Looking at modern times, it would probably trace it to mid-19th and early 20th-century discourses on gender roles, where this idea of the ‘conformity of a woman’ or ‘true womanhood’ was made the norm,” said Chatterjee. “This idea of womanhood placed value on purity, chastity, piety, submission and domesticity. Women’s ‘true and honourable’ roles were only as mother, daughter, wife—with 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 body photos ever a way to ‘stick it to the man’? Or is it just making it harder for women to be thought of as more than sex beings? A trending movement on social media is #FakeModels, 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 violence.

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 these arguments. “They are supposing what people are demanding, so there aren’t much to be upset about,” she said. “Eliminating OnlyFans or Pornhub or any of these websites just 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 streets,” he said.

Both students stressed that not enough people see the damage this does. “As a trend you do your 9-5, I’m essentially doing a freelance job.”

— 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.”