

How the pandemic has made young people more vulnerable to risky online sexual trade



Young women become compelled to share more of their bodies on social media and “act sexy” to maintain their subscribers’ interest and earn money. In this blog, [Elena Martellozzo](#) and [Paula Bradbury](#) of the [Centre for Abuse and Trauma Studies at Middlesex University](#) examine the impact that social media platform OnlyFans has had on vulnerable young people during the coronavirus pandemic and suggest measures to protect them from online harm.

The existence of OnlyFans – a subscription-based social media platform where users can sell and/or purchase original content from softcore or X rated – predates the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown of 2020, but [its popularity and notoriety has increased significantly over the last year](#). OnlyFans came to our attention through celebrity endorsements, other social media platforms and apps, as well as the BBC Three documentary entitled [Nudes4Sale](#).

This British investigative documentary revealed how thousands of people across the world – including celebrities, ordinary members of the public including, more concerningly, teenagers – are making a healthy profit from selling self-generated sexual content for cash through the interactive platform OnlyFans. On OnlyFans you earn money by gaining member subscriptions and by generating content that people want to pay for. Lauren, one of the girls featured in the documentary, told the [Times Radio](#) in a recent interview that she earned £15,000 in her first month of being on the site.

However, these kinds of success stories are unique and only experienced by a few, leaving a significant number vulnerable to a darker side of OnlyFans, and the manipulative and predatory behaviours of individuals that operate within it. Vulnerable young people may find themselves using sites like this one to support their living, particularly during the lockdown period, which has completely eclipsed parts of the hospitality industry and other opportunities to find work. Sasha, who struggled financially and has a history of mental health issues, told [BBC4](#) that she earned few hundred pounds a month on OnlyFans, using sex toys and collaborating with other performers.

With a fast-growing subscriber-base of more than 200,000 new members every 24 hours, it’s easy to see how enthusiastic endorsements by the likes of Beyoncé and Cardi B make OnlyFans an attractive site for young people.

What the endorsements don’t show, though, is that OnlyFans is a fiercely competitive market where young people, often women, can fall into a risky cycle. In an interview with [Channel 4](#), Dr Elena Martellozzo said that young women are compelled to raise their game by sharing more and more of their bodies, and perform sexual acts requested by subscribers to maintain their interest, increase their popularity and earn more money.

The women in the Nudes4Sale documentary had all received messages from subscribers asking them to participate in offline sex acts. One of the girls interviewed in the documentary, Lauren, admitted that she received messages offering £5,000 for sex. While Lauren can afford to say no, many less successful young women – potentially young teenage girls – might not be able to, and might be at risk of being lured into danger with the promise of money.

And during a pandemic, having an income is more crucial than ever. Whilst the site might have [changed sex work forever](#) by creating a safe environment for sex workers to engage with their clients, it has opened up a new arena for inexperienced young people who are lured into making quick cash for kink.

“It’s impossible to say precisely how lockdown is impacting our behaviour and what the side effects will be”, wrote [Anne Marie Tomchak](#) in a recent piece in Glamour, “but there are already indications that more nudes are being requested and sent during this time as people increase their digital interactions while staying at home, and OnlyFans reports a spike in activity.”

OnlyFans sparked a global media response to rising concerns of adolescent online risk-taking, and the legal ramifications of creating, distributing and possessing sexual images of a minor – laws, which children themselves are no less impervious to.

[A 2020 report published by the Internet Watch Foundation](#) revealed that they have identified a 44% increase (of all intercepted content) in the number of self-generated indecent images produced by children, of which the most prolific age group is girls between 11 and 13.

COVID-19 and child protection

The COVID-19 global pandemic has not only revealed our vulnerabilities to biological viral threats, but also to our inability to protect our children online.

In the midst of a lockdown, COVID-19 has facilitated a greater opportunity for digital immersion. While the internet opens up a plethora of positive opportunities for individual growth and self-acceptance, there is also the potential for great harm to be caused against the most vulnerable in our communities— children and young people.

[Immature cognitive development and reduced capacity to self-regulate leaves children at risk](#) from criminal accountability, sexual predators, and the dark side of the online sex industry. With the easy opportunity to view pornography and violent content at the click of a button, there's also the easy opportunity to produce it, and sell it to those with a sexual predilection in children.

In 2021, the online marketplace for sharing sexual images for cash is no longer dominated by the sex industry and adult sex workers. It is a phenomenon that goes beyond regulation and is being utilised also by teenagers as purveyors for their self-production of nude, semi-nude, on-demand kink images and videos for online clients.

Andy Burrows, head of child safety online policy at the [NSPCC](#), said: "We are concerned that there are risks to be associated with user-generated explicit abuse content sites, such as OnlyFans, which are worthy of substantive academic focus. This relates to children being readily able to access inappropriate and sexually explicit content, both on the site itself but also as a result of user generated content being posted as 'trailers' to social networks."

What can parents do?

We would encourage all parents to familiarise themselves with social media, particularly those platforms which are popular with young people. Don't assume that your teen will not visit sites such as OnlyFans.

Parents need to be aware that social media apps such as Instagram, Facebook and Snapchat are the most commonly used platforms for sex offenders to target and groom children. [The NSPCC found that](#) during the first three months of the UK's 2020 lockdown, Instagram was used 37% of recorded cases of sexual communication with a child.

Tiktok has [aggressively responded](#) to the high volume of Onlyfans members who prolifically use their platform to advertise links to their accounts and content by introducing stricter community guidelines, but as we have seen in our research, a large volume falls beneath the radar which includes sexually explicit information about sex acts, fetishes and violence. Many Onlyfans members simply create a new account once removed.

If you discover that your child is actively engaging with such sites, don't make them feel guilty. It's not your child's fault. Children often visit such sites through peer pressure, general curiosity or simply by accident. However, do prevent them from accessing it in future. It may not make you a popular parent, but it's what needs to be done to keep your child safe, both online and offline. We recommend the following:

- If you don't have a filter on your child's laptop or home computer already, make sure you get one as soon as you can
- Browse your teen's tracking history. If you see OnlyFans on there, that's a red flag
- Scan your credit card for any charges that look like they may be from OnlyFans
- If you suspect your teen has been on the site, have an honest discussion with them about online safety
- Talk to your teen, in general, about the [damaging effects of pornography](#)
- Make sure your child understands that they never know who they're talking to online, and that by sharing personal information they're putting themselves at risk.

Stumbling across inappropriate content can have [significant adverse impacts for children and young people](#). This includes distorting their view of sex and relationships, and potentially having a desensitising effect for some young people.

Online pornography is increasingly identified as an [influence on children's and young people's sexual lives](#). Whether we like or not, pornography is recognised as an important part of young people's sexual socialisation and it is crucial to have open discussions with them about this. The existence of sites such as OnlyFans should be included in the discussions.

Notes

This text was [originally published](#) on the Media@LSE blog and has been re-posted with permission.

This post gives the views of the authors and does not represent the position of the LSE Parenting for a Digital Future blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Featured image: photo by Thirdman on Pexels