



12-19-2019

Selling Sex in the Social Media Era

Madison VanWinkle

Selling Sex in the Social Media Era

Platforms such as OnlyFans blur the lines between influencing and creating elicited content



Madison VanWinkle

Dec 10, 2019 · 9 min read

With a sly smile on his face, Andrew, whose name has been changed to protect his identity, casually sips on a Nitro Cold Brew as he talks loudly in a bustling Starbucks in Covina, California. Andrew has a confident demeanor, but it fades slightly when asked about his side-hustle running an account on OnlyFans, a London-based social media app for content creators and their subscribers/fans. The content is often, though not exclusively by any means, of the adult nature.

Andrew recovers quickly and with a smooth wink, tells me I should subscribe. He says, in a flat tone, that his current rate is \$10 a month, but he can inflate or deflate that price. He is thinking about raising the price because the service, Onlyfans, takes a 20-percent cut and he also may have to pay taxes on his earnings. Furthermore, he only receives a payout from the service every seven days, though subscribers can tip him through Venmo and other instant money transfer services.



Courtesy of OnlyFans.com

As his leg nervously shakes underneath the metal table, Andrew glances at the men

sitting at the table next to us. In a lower voice, he says his motivation to monetize explicit photos and videos of himself was financial. Andrew explains that he withdrew from San Francisco State University after one semester because it was too expensive. He currently lives at home with his mother and younger sister while working as a chef and pursuing music, visual design, and voice acting as additional side hustles. Since he was able to save up some money, he plans to return to community college in the spring to pursue a degree in business management. He describes his OnlyFans account, which obligates him to create and share content with his subscribers, as another creative outlet. But he says it isn't necessarily fun for him and he often views it as a chore, something he has to do.

Andrew peeps up, though, when he starts describing his OnlyFans work as entrepreneurial. He says many men and women would send him flirtatious messages on social media and he realized there was a demand for him, for his body. Since he was already sending nudes for free, he decided why not make money off it. "Supply and demand, you know?" he says, with a smirk on his face.

Leaning across the table, Andrew laughs and shakes his head while explaining that he was just flirting with a man on Instagram whom he convinced to subscribe to his account. He says he grossed \$350 this week and he predicts he will earn more as his subscriber base grows. He describes his subscribers as clients and he interacts with some of them, charging additional fees to exchange messages with individuals and to provide exclusive content. Andrew says his target audience is both men and women, some of whom he knows. He advertises his OnlyFans account on his public Twitter, and with a laugh, he tells me that the brother of one of his friends from high school recently subscribed and tipped him \$50.

His demeanor changes, though, and Andrew looks up at the sky and blushes when he, haltingly, reveals that some of his sister's friends have subscribed to his account. The site allows subscribers to go by pseudonyms, so he is unable to confirm his subscribers' identities unless they share them with him. Chuckling, he says that when he gets a *like* from someone after promoting his OnlyFans account on social media followed by a new subscriber, he can kind of assume who it is.

Andrew doesn't attempt to hide his participation with the service. While he doesn't use his legal name on his page, he does use his nickname and links the page to his Twitter account. He has a public, NSFW Twitter account where he posts "teasers," pictures and videos to entice people to subscribe to his account. He says he uses this account to interact with other OnlyFans "creators," a community he describes as a supportive, but claims that he doesn't personally subscribe to anyone else's accounts.

. . .

“If you are sending your nudes for free, you need to reconsider.”

Andrew says he has not received any backlash yet from his friends about using the service, but he wouldn't care if he did, since he has to “capture that bag.” He also says that he did his research and knew what he was getting himself into before starting an account after two months of pondering. He says he is comfortable with his body and he already had content, naked pictures he had taken and saved previously, so he figured why not make extra money from the convenience of his phone. He pauses, sipping on his iced drink, before saying softly, “Unfortunately, sex sells. All I can do is, you know, supply it.”

He recommends the service to others as long as they are comfortable with themselves and they do their research. “If you are sending your nudes for free, you need to reconsider,” he says with a laugh.

While Andrew isn't obligated to post a certain amount of content per month, keeping his subscribers happy can be a burden as they demand more content and more explicit posts. Posts on his OnlyFans page encourage his followers to message him for exclusive content with the warning that all kinks are welcome. Balancing personal and professional relationships can be difficult, too — he knows some of his subscribers and he interacts with them individually. He does not believe he would pursue a sexual or

romantic relationship with any of his subscribers, but he does not judge them for subscribing since they help pay his bills.

What about fears that his content might be used against him? When he posts explicit photos and videos to his Onlyfans page, subscribers can take screen-shots, which could open the door to blackmail. Andrew insists, his jaw tightening slightly, that it would not matter as he is transparent about his use of the service and he knew what he was getting into. While his mother does not know about the page, Andrew is confident that if she found out, she'd be okay with it.

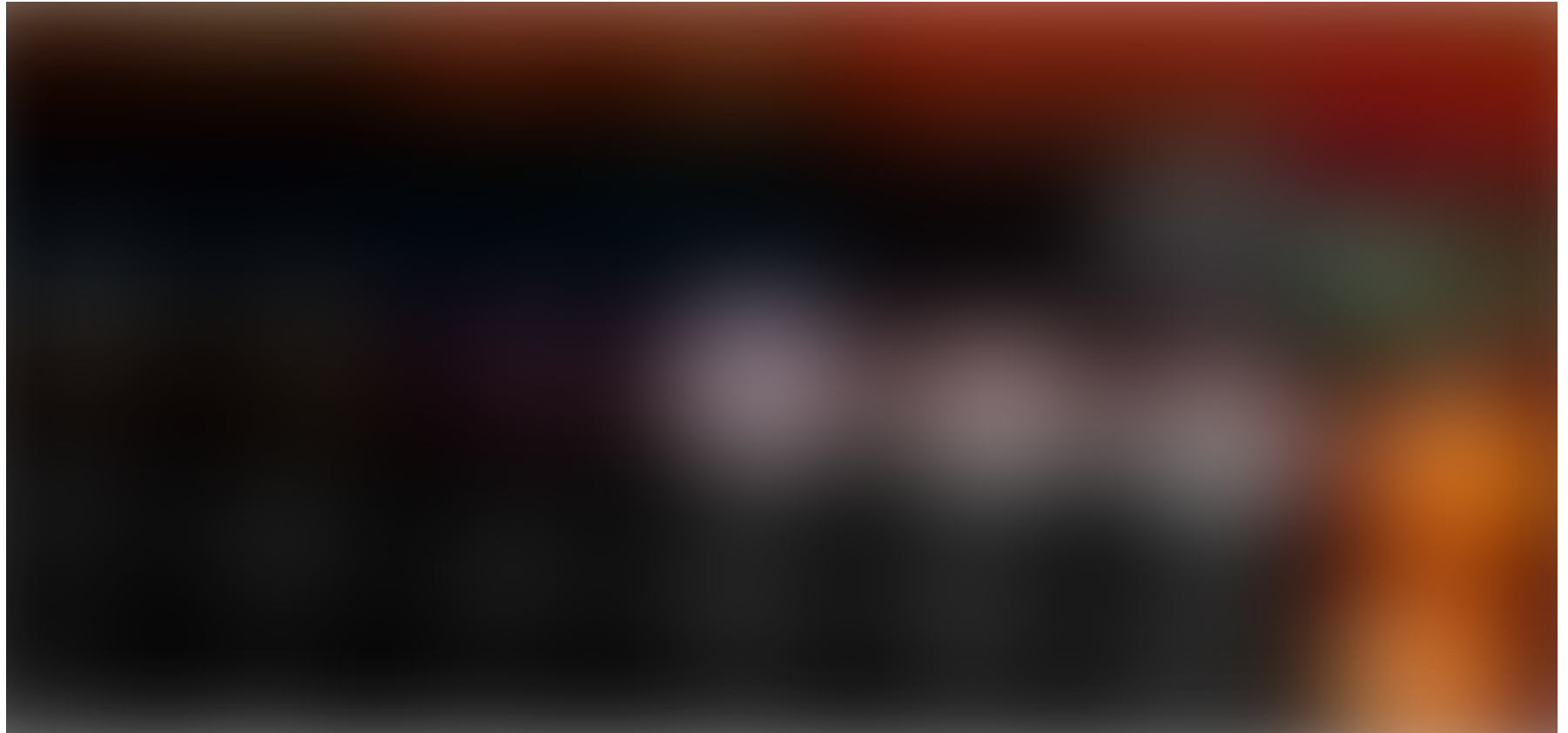
Andrew says he is in the process of expanding his involvement in the digital sex industry via Premium Snapchat, an exclusive Snapchat account on which he will post explicit videos and photos on his story and provide custom videos. This does come with legal risk, though, as the payment is under the table and it violates Snapchat's Terms of Service. He is thinking about pushing himself even further to act in pornography for Pornhub, but he wants to take baby steps as he thinks porn is more professional and will require more time. He does, however, post sex tapes on his OnlyFans page as part of the monthly content he provides to his subscribers.

With a laugh, he acknowledges that his work in the digital sex industry may prevent him from working for companies like Disney, but he will deal with it when the time comes. The Generation Z ideal of being “here for a good time, not a long time” drives people like Andrew who are using temporary solutions to solve life-long problems — in his case, being from a single-parent, lower-income household.

. . .

“Do you guys just think there are no consequences to YOLO-ing all the time?”

Howard Klepper, a University of Arizona Philosophy professor, argues in his “Sexual Exploitation and the Value of Persons” that sex workers, digital or not, are inherently perceived and treated as a mere means to an end by their clients. Clients, or subscribers, intend to achieve pleasure for themselves. Klepper’s research reflects that this use of sex workers as a means to an end creates a cycle of objectification that tends to prey on vulnerable populations, including lower-income, young people.



Courtesy of Mike Lawrence via Flickr

Marie, a close friend of Andrew whose name has been changed due to the sensitive nature of this article, dated Andrew for a few months when they were in high school. She says she was shocked when she learned of his participation on OnlyFans, but says he has always been a sexually liberated and open person. She recalls the time when they were teenagers and nude pictures of Andrew were hacked and sent around to many people from multiple schools when they were teenagers. Since the pictures were already out there, she can understand why he’d want to make money from them.

While Marie acknowledges that Andrew has had to move around and work multiple jobs to make ends meet, she is concerned that Andrew, whom she describes as “lively, kind, genuine and intelligent, but immature,” is not thinking of the consequences. That

may just be his nature. For example, the pinned tweet on his public Twitter is a screenshot of a text-message exchange between Andrew and his boss. When the boss chastises Andrew for frequently calling off work, Andrew replied that he quits “... effective immediately.” Andrew’s public social media pages also show him posting tickets he bought for Raves and concerts, along with frequent posts about getting drunk, behavior that is very similar to that of his peers.

When the subject of sex work as a side hustle was broached in his class, Whittier College Professor of Journalism Joseph Donnelly, asked his Introduction to Journalism class [for which this article was done], “Do you guys just think there are no consequences to YOLO-ing all the time?”

The class, comprised primarily of 18 to 21-year-olds, laughed and shook their heads. Several students asserted that they either didn’t care about the consequences, and some argued that we shouldn’t judge Andrew or those hustling for money to live on too harshly. In a 2016 study published by the US National Library of Medicine National Institutes of Health, researchers found that in 2011, when the “You Only Live Once” (YOLO) motto was at peak popularity in teen slang, sex and alcohol usage was most often associated with a lack of concern for consequences, drawing a connection between popular culture and how slang heavily influenced teenagers' decision making.

In a 2019 interview with the *New York Times*, Tim Stokely, the CEO of OnlyFans, expressed an interest in changing the platform from being associated with pornography to being a part of the influencer culture. The OnlyFans website advertises “Sign up to make money and interact with your fans.” This tagline appeals to those in the social-media generation such as Andrew, whose artistic nature and desire to move up in the world drive them to pursue careers as online influencers. OnlyFans has been integral to blurring the line between sex workers and influencers, with some users of the service acting as both.

Andrew, at nineteen-years-old, is business savvy and intelligent, but he is still a product of his generation and culture. We take a drive to Target so he can do his shopping. While casually smoking a joint, he tells me a guy he knew from high-school subscribed

to his OnlyFans and asked him to hook-up over the upcoming Winter-Break. With a laugh, he tells me he may do it, but he needs to see him first.

He says he tries to keep a lid on his personal or identifying information and isn't concerned about stalkers or over-eager fans. Asked if he's encountered any creepiness, Andrew says, "No, thankfully no. But, I mean I'm not the type to push over to those types of things."

I ask Andrew if he is single. He sarcastically accuses me of flirting with him, before asserting that he is "single as a Pringle." He tells me that if he was dating someone and they asked him to stop using OnlyFans, he would try to get to the root of the problem, which he assumes would be insecurity. If his hypothetical partner insisted that he quit using it, and the relationship was serious, Andrew, after much hesitation, says he would delete his account and find a different side hustle.

After browsing the aisles at Target, we come upon a seasonal display and with a childlike glee, Andrew asks if we can take a holiday photo in front of an artificial Christmas tree. Laughing, he sets his phone on a timer and runs to wrap an arm around my shoulder, smiling like we're a happy family.

Thanks to Joe Donnelly (show).

Social Media

Sex Work

Side Hustle