

# fandom ination



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CHARLOTTE RUTHERFORD

**Sign up. Log in.  
Cash out. Repeat.  
Why so many people  
are buying into  
free porn's biggest  
competitors**

BY LINA ABASCAL

When Elsa Jean flounces into the studio in full hair and makeup, one has to wonder why she's here. Every moment she spends on set, she's losing money. "I make about \$30,000 to \$40,000 a month from my OnlyFans account," says Jean (pictured), whose platinum blonde waves and wide eyes leave no question as to which animated phenomenon inspired her stage name. "I've cut my studio work way back because I really don't need to do it anymore. It takes me 30 minutes to film something. On set, it takes hours."

Although only 23 years old, Jean is a five-year veteran of the adult business—a porn superstar (1.5 million Instagram followers and counting) and now a proselytizer for OnlyFans, a membership-based social platform that hosts the content

of more than 100,000 creators for more than 8 million subscribers (or "fans"). Launched in 2016, OnlyFans, while not exclusively for adult performers, has disrupted the porn industry by making it easier for sex workers to generate income off their content, shifting them away from major studios for casting, production, distribution and payment. Increasingly influential in a time when consumer demand for amateur content is trending up (videos filed in Pornhub's Amateur category boast the site's longest average view time: 15 minutes, 25 seconds), subscription sites including OnlyFans, Fan-

Centro and JustFor.Fans are grooming a new generation of self-made men and women. And many of them are adult performers working from home.

Those subscription sites are just a few of the third-party platforms whose main services support sex workers striving for economic independence. Why spend time toiling for a suit when you can sell directly to your audience on your own schedule and your own terms? It's the remote-ification of porn. The potential impact—and what's likely making some porn-tube giants anxious—is the antiquation of studio-produced adult entertainment. If sex workers can own their content outright while growing their audiences with the promise of on-demand, how can Pornhub, whose library largely comprises studio-based productions, refresh its offerings? Jean offers a vivid example to spell out the benefits of OnlyFans over free streaming: "I don't do anal unless it's on my OnlyFans or my Snapchat," she says. "That's how I locked in my people."

Most sites' subscription models involve a monthly fee for access to exclusive images, videos and chat sessions that are typically but not exclusively pornographic. Workout videos, product reviews presented by models in various states of undress and selfies of women applying makeup are also sold, based on the account. Content creators pay a fee, in the form of a percentage, to use the platform. FanCentro, which operates on Snapchat's platform but is unaffiliated with the Snap Inc.-owned app, takes 25 percent of subscription fees; in exchange it provides models with their own URLs, as well as a payment-collection service—important, given that PayPal, Venmo, Square, Cash App and nearly all other payment processors do not allow transactions for sex work or services.

Professional porn stars have had their own websites since the advent of the internet, and Pornhub allows anyone to upload content to its ever-growing database. But just as musicians com-



plain about Spotify's payouts, performers view Pornhub's returns as poor: on average, 64 cents per 1,000 views. Jean doesn't even maintain a personal website; after talking to other actresses, she realized that "OnlyFans and Snapchat is where the money is."

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Across industries, new technologies are helping purveyors sell content to niche audiences. This is the strategy behind those sponsored posts for athleisure wear or mail-order meal prep interspersed among puppies and food porn on Instagram. But when it comes to adult content, performers still have to operate in legal gray areas while taking advantage of always-plugged-in consumers' fondness for personalized subscription services (Netflix, Trunk Club) and direct-to-consumer brands (Kylie Jenner's Lip Kits, Casper).

Stephanie Michelle, a hentai-inspired performer, recently shifted her focus to OnlyFans from other platforms. There, she forfeits 20 percent of her earnings from her content, all of which sits behind a paywall. Daily, she posts 30-second to minute-long clips while chatting with

her fans. Such engagement helps her know which content they like best. In turn, fans remain satisfied, paying customers longer.

Even Pornhub's headliners are on OnlyFans, including Riley Reid, the Los Angeles-based porn star who recently tallied more than 1 billion views on Pornhub. In fact, she's on almost every third-party site so people can find her no matter where they're searching. "I monetize greater off myself by working for myself," she says. "I think more girls are realizing that you can get more out of *you* selling your body online and owning your own content."

Reid doesn't want to miss an opportunity to sell content, and she doesn't. People are consistently buying subscriptions and accessing video clips on networks she doesn't even promote. Her primary focuses are her FanCentro-operated Snapchat and her personal website, ReidMyLips.com, where she offers studio-level porn content for around \$9.99 per video or monthly passes for \$34.99.

For those with less dedicated audiences, building a custom site can be more of a hassle than it's worth. Hoesha, an OnlyFans account owner in Arizona, tried to sell adult content on her own platform, with mixed results. Messaging

fans individually was not too time-consuming; collecting payment, however, became tricky once her original payment processor banned her after too many fans wrote explicit messages in their payment memos. She was also tired of fans haggling over price.

"My rates are my rates. I can plainly say what I'm selling and be as explicit as I need to be with my subscribers," she says of OnlyFans. The 20 percent cut frustrates her, but owning her content is a perk. "At the end of it all, it's all yours. You have the rights to your content, whereas with Snapchat or sending clips directly, you don't. If my content leaks, OnlyFans makes it way easier to track down the source." After less than half a year on the platform, Hoesha, whose offerings last year included a nude review of Popeyes viral chicken sandwich, has nearly enough subscribers to stay afloat without a day job.

Danny Labito, an amateur gay fetish creator from Detroit, moved his fans from Pornhub's Modelhub, where his earnings were bleak, to OnlyFans. Occasionally some of his loyal OnlyFans viewers will message him for private commissions. He negotiates rates for custom content on Twitter, Instagram and e-mail, and his patrons pay him through PayPal or Cash App. Selling sexual content violates both these processors' terms, but he uses them anyway. "There aren't many other payment options for sex workers," he says. In his first three months, he made \$7,000 from OnlyFans subscriptions and tips, supplementing the full-time job he holds while he finishes college.

For someone like Reid, managing content sales and subscribers can become nearly impossible. It's one of the reasons she finally decided to partner with FanCentro—which promised to do "all the dirty work"—after years of offers to "join the premium Snapchat bandwagon."

Joining that bandwagon would mean manually adding and deleting users from her accounts—arguably the most tedious part of using premium Snapchat. If someone cancels a subscription, access must be revoked manually or Reid risks sending content for free. For a sense of scale, Reid says she regularly hits Snapchat's maximum of 5,000 followers per account and has to create sister accounts—all of which distribute the same content. The operation is so large that Reid has three smartphones solely so she doesn't have to log in and out on one device.

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As these third-party tools multiply, claiming they can help sex workers make up to \$100,000 a month (the amount Reid says FanCentro estimates she could pull in), sex work is far from autonomous or fail-safe. Because FanCentro functions with Snapchat but is not involved with Snap Inc., creators who violate the app's industry-typical terms by uploading "pornographic content" can be banned. Jean's Snapchat has been deleted three times already.

"I'm not sure what will happen when Snapchat catches up and everyone is removed, but as of now, I encourage all the girls, and myself, to milk it as much as possible," Reid says.

I ask Jean if subscription sites can contribute to the normalization of sex work. "Even though not everyone will do it, everyone wants to do it," she tells me. "When I get online, I'll see girls who aren't in the industry. They're Instagram models. Their followers sign up because they're like, 'I've been wanting to see this girl naked.'"

This doesn't make them porn stars, at least not according to Reid. "I don't think they understand what it's like to go to set and have sex with someone you've never met, where there's a guy over there with the boom," she says.



The truth is, with the options now available, they'll likely never have to. But cracking the surface of mainstream consciousness through OnlyFans and FanCentro doesn't always equate to mainstream acceptance. After all, SUBSCRIBE NOW buttons don't change laws or end discrimination. Not overnight. Not even over years.

The trouble is that today, self-promotion on the internet—and with it, self-acceptance—is a necessity. To be successful on these so-called fan sites, visibility is required. Keeping your business a secret doesn't result in more sales. This means legions of sex workers are actively advertising their services on social media to millions, cashing in every day that they're not being shut down.

For all their disruption, these sites have hardly progressed the sex workers' rights movement. "Sex work is work," as the rallying cry goes. They have, however, created opportunities for sex workers to build community and financial mobility in the age of FOSTA-SESTA, when basic online tools such as message boards have been shuttered in the government's attempt to end "sex trafficking." Amid the exodus from studios, the promised land remains what it's been for decades: validity, rights and respect across legal systems.

As Reid argues, "It's such a normal thing for people to be selling their bodies on the internet." 

