OnlyFans stars say TikTok is making them rich

Lee thanks TikTok, an app she barely knew about five months ago, for her newfound status as a six-figure earner. She lived a relatively average life up until recently: she worked a retail job on the East Coast, shared an apartment with roommates, and, by all standards, was a regular 20-year-old. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in March, she, like many others, joined TikTok and posted videos of herself doing "random" things, like putting on makeup, showing off her height (below 5 feet), and dancing. People seemed to enjoy it.

The more she posted, though, the more commenters asked one specific question: did she have an OnlyFans? "I actually had no idea OnlyFans existed until I was recommended to do it," says Lee, who goes by Goth Egg online and asked to only go by her first name to protect her privacy. OnlyFans allows creators of all kinds to put their work behind a pay-walled subscription, similar to Patreon, but it's mostly associated with sex work. So many people asked Lee about OnlyFans, she says, that she decided to start a page, simply replying to a comment to publicize it. Five months and one viral video later, Lee says she's making anywhere from $110,000 to $200,000 a month.

"The more famous I became on TikTok," Lee said, "the more fans I got on OnlyFans."

Lee is one of many creators who have found that TikTok, with its algorithmically generated For You page and propensity for rocketing regular people off to stardom, holds the key to building a massive subscriber base on OnlyFans. Some creators already have an OnlyFans and see TikTok as a marketing

platform offering free, massive reach, while others join TikTok only to learn about OnlyFans later, like Lee. The two unrelated platforms have developed something of a symbiotic relationship, fueling each other and their users, for better or worse.

TikTok commenters convinced Lee to join OnlyFans and grew her fan base

“I just started using TikTok, and I’ve already gained over 100 subs from the first week of using it,” says Lydia Jasminee who had an OnlyFans before she got on TikTok. “I have to have a TikTok because that’s the most popular social media platform right now. That’s where you’re going to get the most subs.”

The tricky part about advertising an OnlyFans on TikTok, though, is that the app would seemingly prefer these users disappear. Its team often deletes their accounts and videos, and the app bans porn, most nudity, and any content that “commits, promotes, or glorifies sexual solicitation or sexual objectification.” In fact, direct links to OnlyFans are banned, TikTok confirmed to *The Verge*.

Yet, their videos perform well, mainly because TikTok’s own algorithm takes over and surfaces their videos to millions of people around the world. TikTok can’t prevent OnlyFans users from joining, but these women have to find a balance between creating sexy enough content to bring people over to OnlyFans while still operating under the TikTok’s team’s radar.

Jasminee says most people pick up on the fact that she might have an OnlyFans just from her content, which mostly consists of jokes and her wearing a bra or tight clothing. “If you see a half naked female online, they probably have an OnlyFans,” she says. Jasminee points commenters to the link in her TikTok bio, which connects people to all of her pages, including OnlyFans. Her only income right now, which fully supports her, is OnlyFans.

TikTok’s algorithm propels random people to stardom

“Even girls that didn’t start off with wanting to do OnlyFans when they made their TikTok, they’ll get so many comments, and they know they can make a lot of money, so [they] start one anyways,” says Elizabeth Danu, whose TikTok videos typically involve her bouncing around while overlaid text encourages viewers to find enlightenment and happiness. Rather than OnlyFans, Danu directs fans to her Patreon, which she says she uses over OnlyFans because she doesn’t consider herself a sex worker.

When TikTok does take down accounts or videos, the women often don’t know why. Lee says she was forced to start a new account after someone reported her, but she’s not sure what video was the problem. Danu says she now won’t “zoom in on any body parts,” which seemingly has done the trick to avoid having videos deleted. The women keep finding workarounds. Lee, for instance, doesn’t mention OnlyFans in her content, except in her bio, which says, “Top 5/ top 0.01% rank if you know what I mean,” a nod to OnlyFans’ internal popularity ranking system.

Moderation is particularly crucial for TikTok to remain a well-known kids app. It’s massively popular with teens and young adults — more than a quarter of users are under 18, according to data from last year — and having sex workers promote their content directly to every teen’s phone might alarm parents or regulators. Still, the OnlyFans connection is an open secret that’s well-documented online.

You can get a sense of TikTok thirst from Reddit, where communities have formed around documenting women who look slightly risqué. R/TikTokThots collects content from women who tend to post sexier videos, or at least ones with more of their bodies showing. Not all of these women have OnlyFans, but Danu credits the ecosystem of Reddit and TikTok for feeding the subscriber bases of those who do.

“Actually when I first started my TikTok, I had to block the word OnlyFans from comments because just every comment would

be like, ‘Make an OnlyFans, make an OnlyFans, make an OnlyFans,” she says.

The women have to work around TikTok mods

TikTok can drive success for creators who started on OnlyFans, too. Jenna Phillips says her OnlyFans account barely grew during her first year, until she went viral on TikTok. Phillips roleplays as a puppy, posting videos of herself being scolded or sent into a cage because she apparently peed on the floor. Her first viral video involved her lapping water out of a bowl; it gained over a million views before being deleted. (She only fully transitioned both her TikTok and OnlyFans to puppy content after she found success.) She now says she makes six figures a month and runs the pages full-time.

“I’m super grateful for TikTok,” she says.

Her original TikTok account, which she says had more than 250,000 followers, was taken down for apparently violating community guidelines. Her newest account, @puppygirljenna, which she launched in early August, already has the same number of followers. She doesn’t link her OnlyFans page in her profile and instead points followers to her Instagram, where they can request to follow her private account.

“I don’t know of any rules or anything specifically that you can’t [link to your account], but I’ve heard from other people that it can get your account in trouble,” she says.

All of the women say they try to keep their content relatively PG so that kids could happen upon it without them having to worry.

“I have a feeling that they’re younger so they don’t understand the whole nature [of puppy play],” Phillips says.

Lee says she’ll delete comments that she can tell come from kids because, at least when she had a smaller following, she could look at their individual profiles. “I wish there was

more parental control," she says.

TikTok tells *The Verge* it is, "committed to promoting a safe and positive app environment" and will "continue to closely monitor and remove content that violates our policies," including accounts that attempt to redirect traffic.

"I'm super grateful for TikTok."
The women are on their own when it comes to age-gating the audience TikTok brings them. But more than anything, they want to understand why their accounts and videos are deleted. Phillips says she appealed one video takedown and succeeded, but she has no idea why it was flagged in the first place. She wishes TikTok gave her an ambassador or a contact she could reach out to for help when she doesn't know what went wrong.

"It was devastating to wake up to [my account being deleted]," she says. "I think I cried."

TikTok might not want sex workers advertising OnlyFans, but it'll never be able to stop them. Its software is a powerful discovery and marketing tool, regardless of the content people promote. The company just needs to stop being in denial about who can find an audience.

Update September 17th, 11:55AM ET: *Updated to include a comment from TikTok and confirmation that links to OnlyFans are banned.*

https://www.theverge.com/2020/9/17/21439657/onlyfans-tiktok-subscribers-videos-fans