

Tangled Web

Although touted as a more cerebral environment, looking for love on the Internet is like patronizing a fantasy singles bar.

By Julianna Hayes

Niki and Bubba are practicing safe sex in a roomful of strangers.

As they murmur intimately to each other, the others converse amongst themselves as if they're not even there.

"Niki, I find you very sexy."

"Thanks, Bubba, you're not so bad yourself. You know just what to say to turn me on."

"Yep, I sure do...hehehehehe."

"Tell me again how much you want me, Bubba."

"Why don't I show you?"

Meanwhile, the others, mostly people in their 30s, or so they say, are offering up drinks — paralyzers, Southern Comforts, martinis with extra olives, cappuccinos with a shot of Kahlua. A woman named Xena

Blue, age 45, sighs and nudges some fellow called Mick, age 34.

"Tell me about yourself," she says. "Do you like older women?"

I'm in the room, too, and I observe these exchanges with a mixture of fascination and revulsion. I'm slightly embarrassed by the blatant carnality, the cheap and cheesy conversations. Yet, I've never even met any of these people, at least not in person.

You see, we're not really together here at all. There is no actual room, we've been connected by an intricate system of wires and circuit boards. We're part of the ethereal world wide web. It's full of relationships built on illusion.

In the past decade

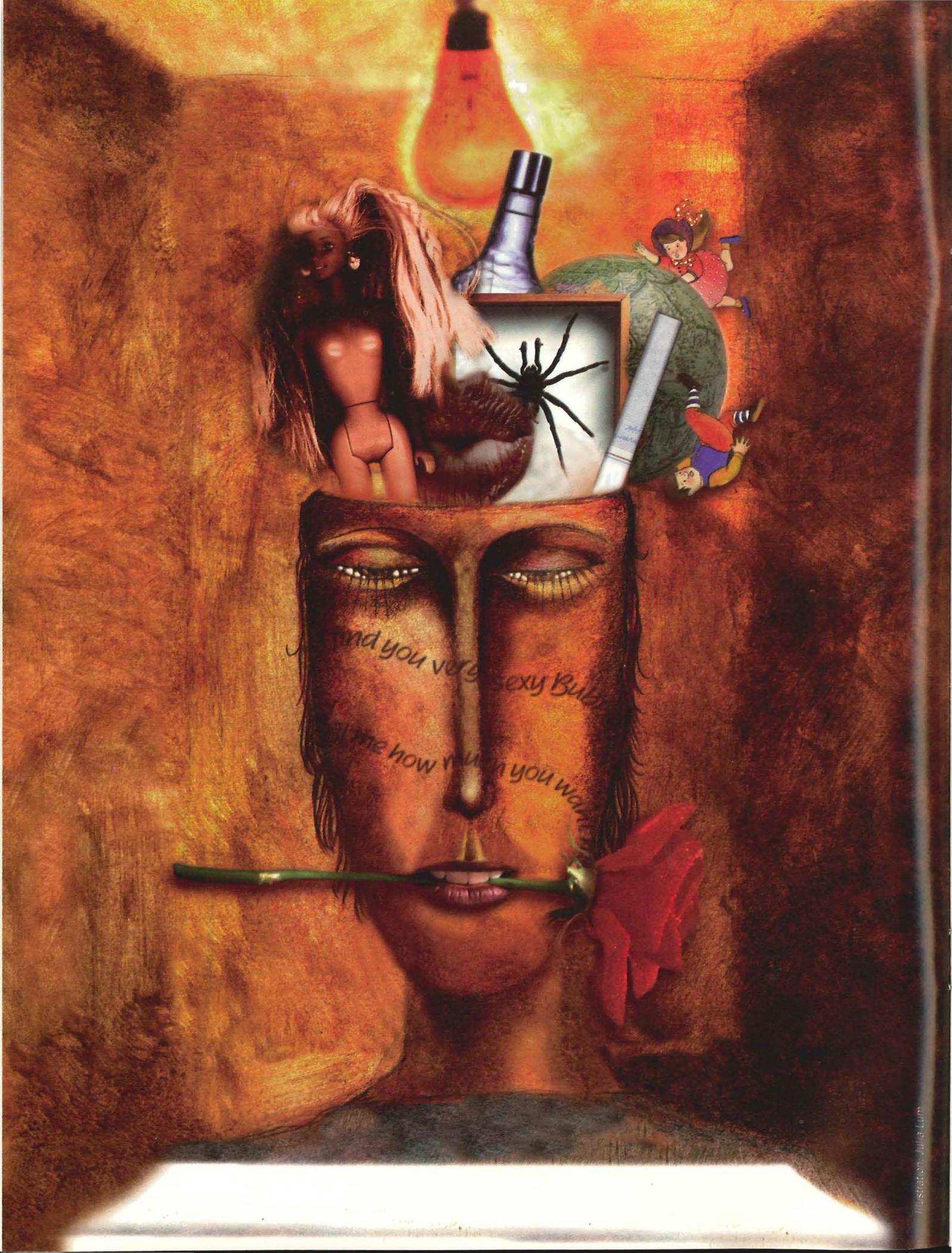
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Imagine if some of the world's most favourite lovers met over the Internet. A tongue in cheek look at what might have been!

By Alan Sherbinin

Lookin' for love in all the wrong places? You can join the thousands of unmatched souls who now bypass the expense of 900 numbers and vodka cocktails to meet, fall in love, marry, argue and divorce through the convenience of the Internet — the new carpal tunnel of love. The romantics of today are not judged by their builds but rather by their typing speeds. This

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communication on the internet has evolved from a system of feeble bulletin boards into a rich social network. Online chat rooms have taken on an immense popularity and in theory they do have a certain amount of merit. They're places where you can connect and confer with people from around the world about countless topics — the arts, history, politics, sports etc.

That's what I expected — or at least hoped for — when I logged on to the Globe Chat network in January. Using the moniker Jules21 (apparently there were 20 other Jules who joined up before me) I connected to the literature chat room only to discover no one there had even the remotest interest in the latest novels.

No matter what they're called or what face is put on them, chat rooms are really nothing more than virtual singles bars where people are sipping imaginary drinks, having imaginary sex, sharing uninspiring information about the weather. And there is something inherently distasteful about it all.

Take this particular exchange in a room intended for thirtysomethings:

Mick65: First time chatting. Had a few beers. What's up?

Sweetthing: Hey, Mick! Kinda slow tonight. You missed a good party in here last night. Whew!

STFU: Anybody got a cigarette? Anyone here seen my smokes?

Biggin7: Do any women in the room like younger men?

STFU: So bored. Beer needed to sustain life.

Sweetthing: Where you from Mick?

Bubba5: Bubba sighs at Niki.

Bubba5: Bubba nudges Niki.

Bubba5: Bubba shakes Niki.

Bubba5: Bubba pounces on Niki.

Candle13: Drinks all round. Who ordered the paralyzer?

Mick65: I live in Australia. Weather here like a baby's bum, wet and windy. Ended up in a pub all day.

Niki: Whispers to Bubba.

Tweetyhole: If you want to keep something precious you have to lock it up and throw away the key.

Slim67: A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a friggin' horse.

Candle13: LOL (Laugh Out Loud) at Tweetyhole.

Odd though it may seem, if nothing else, the web is safe. You can sit in your living room behind some absurd pseudonym and souped up identity and cruise the chat rooms, talking to strangers, engaging in cyber sex with dozens of people without worrying about sexually-transmitted diseases, rapists or serial killers.

But believe it or not, many people are willing to shed their anonymity and risk coming out into the open in hopes that their cyber mate is the one. There are couples who meet, fall in love and even marry over the web. It has become a kind of high-tech dating service that gives lonely hearts access to prospective mates around the globe, not just to people in their own communities.

Advocates of web romances say personalities are front and centre and people's judgments of each other are not clouded by physical beauty or lack thereof.

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I've tried to steer the topic to more cerebral pursuits and have been promptly ignored by people who want to pretend they're at a hot tub party.

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I wanted to find out if this was indeed true, so I rejoined the Globe under the user name *Blondebabe* and logged on as a thirtysomething, single, white, professional woman.

After three months of chatting with the likes of *DRS* (*Dirty Rotten Scoundrel*), *AGeek63* (yes, there were 62 others who chose

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to call themselves that), *LikesItHot*, *Biggin7*, *Redhotryder*, *Slim61* and *Xracer*, I've concluded the champions of cyber love affairs are full of hooey.

First of all everyone is as obsessed with looks as people in the real world. Your chat partners demand to know your stats and apparently nothing less (or more) than 36"-24"-36" will do. I found myself embellishing my height, minimizing my weight and even exaggerating the length of my hair in hopes of prying intriguing males from the electronic clutches of other buxom babes.

Which brings me to another point. How do you know anything anyone has told you contains even one ounce of truth? The guy who describes himself as a tall, handsome, educated, professional may well be an unemployed toad. And while that may not matter much if you've "connected" on a higher level, chances are you haven't. Most of the conversation is asinine if not offensive.

I've tried on numerous occasions to steer the topic to more cerebral pursuits and have been promptly ignored by people who want to pretend they're at a hot tub party.



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And then there are those who are in it simply for the basest of motives. They'll make light small talk and then ask you to describe, in detail, things phone-sex operators get paid good money for.

That's not to say there isn't the odd man or woman out there in cyber land you might like to get to know. For awhile there, I thought I might have found one. He was a former pro-football-player-turned-urban-transportation-planner and trustee on a California school board. He offered me his web page address at work and out of curiosity I checked him out. He was well educated and obviously quite successful and respected.

But even impressive credentials are no measure of someone's true nature. In the space of a week, Mr. Wonderful metamorphized into a cyberstalker, pressuring me to send photos, give him my personal e-mail address and home and business phone numbers. Every time I went online he would monopolize my time, following me from room to room and sending me pathetic and sometimes lewd notes through the chat network's mail system.

I have to admit that when I first logged on to the chat rooms there was an element of excitement and fun. Where else can you re-invent yourself over and over to be that adventurous, intriguing person you've always wanted to be?

But after awhile the whole thing got boring. I found myself chatting with the same people most of the time and the subject matter was as varied as what you might find in *Cosmopolitan* magazine from issue to issue.

I did run into quite a few Okanaganites, people from Vernon, Kelowna, Summerland and Osoyoos. We chatted briefly about the weather and interests we might have in common. But we were careful not to reveal too much about ourselves for fear we might run into each other someday, or worse, actually know each other. At times I sensed a mutual embarrassment, almost as if we'd been caught with our zippers down or someone had just yanked our disguises off at a nudist masquerade ball. It was too close to home.

It's been weeks now since I've entered the chats. During the last conversation I had with the folks in the thirtysomething room, I warned them they wouldn't be seeing much of me in the future, that I no longer found the chat rooms entertaining.

"But these people are your friends!" was AGeek63's astonished reply. "We're not here for your entertainment!"

That's the sad truth for many, I suppose. I realize chat rooms can help fill the emptiness of the friendless and loveless, people unable to find companionship the traditional way. But they are also safe harbour for predators, liars, cheaters and the just plain dysfunctional. And therein lies the rub.

OL

If Jack, via the Internet, had offered Jill a virtual drink atop a virtual hill, their date would have been virtually painless.

A tongue in cheek look...

Continued from page 29

crack reporter has undertaken the assignment to answer the question, "Does the Internet hold the future of dating?" or, more pointedly, "Is it possible to write 1,000 words about Internet relationships?"

Let's begin with a little history. What is the Internet? It's comprised of the words "inter" meaning "come in" and "net" meaning "gross, less expenses." So, literally, the internet is a mechanism that allows one to enter into a relationship, no matter how gross, without having to buy new clothes.

Internet relationships date back to Genesis. Back before they split up and began solo careers. It is written that Adam and Eve first met over an Apple II — a match made in heaven. Adam had logged onto the chat line "only.male.around" and began communicating with this woman known only by her computer pseudonym, "New Years Eve" — an odd moniker since the calendar had not yet been invented.

As with most initial Internet conversations, the couple was not completely honest. Adam said that he had already met lots of women on the Internet and Eve said that she knew Bill Gates. It so happens that Adam was just ribbing her and, later, Eve admitted that she did not know Bill Gates — she only knew God. They eventually became partners in life after months of chats, truth, faith, love and the realization that there were no other people around.

Not all of the Internet relationships end so happily. When Ken met Barbie on the Internet, he thought he had met a real doll.

His past girlfriends could not measure up to Barbie, so to speak. But Ken soon discovered that Barbie was not his sole mate. She was a

regular Chatty Cathy, e-mailing every Com, Paq, and Harry under aliases such as theFashion Barbie, the Malibu Barbie, the Little Bo Peep Barbie, the Southern Belle Barbie, and the Sybil Barbie. Ken was getting the busy signal

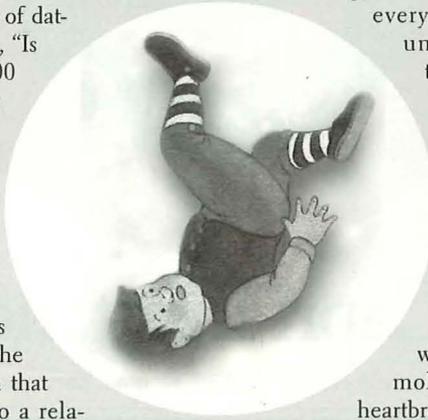
This frustration, combined with the fact the he couldn't type with his plastic fingers all molded together, left Ken heartbroken and hopeless. This

was truly his downtime. He found solace on the "gi.joe.guerrilla" chat line and later moved to Guatemala. Sadly, in the heat of Central America, the brown dye on his head melted and dripped into his eyes, permanently damaging his corneas and keyboard. He now lives in a trailer park in San

Diego supported by a small pension from Mattel and only gets out on the occasional blind date.

The Internet does have a major advantage over traditional dating — safety. Love connections are made from the confines of your own home computer corner. You need not leave your love nest. Physical dates can involve dangerous activities such as driving, walking, eating, or even talking.

Remember Jack and Jills' first real life date? They went up a hill to simply fetch some water. Jack fell down and broke his crown — that paramedics at the scene described as a cranial fracture — and Jill came tumbling after, was taken to hospital, and later released with minor nonlife threatening injuries. If Jack, via the Internet, had offered Jill a virtual drink atop a virtual hill,



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their date would have been virtually painless. In fact, stay off the hills entirely. Enjoy a nice, quiet stroll in the Silicon Valley.

Fast forward to the typical Internet couple of the 90s. Tony (not his real name — his real name is Larry) sees many benefits to computer dates. He likes the fact that people aren't judged by their appearance. And if you saw Tony, you would understand why.

He says people today don't know how to communicate. Tony hates the phony, ambiguous, slang dialogue that so defines



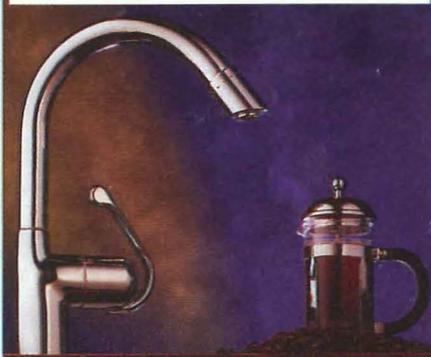
When Ken met Barbie on the internet, he thought he had met a real doll

the bar scene. He says that he prefers to stay at home with his HP 333 Mhz Intel Pentium II Processor with MMX, 64 MB Sync DRAM, 8.0 GB hard drive, DVD 2x CD-ROM, Direct 3D 64-bit graphics, and a 56K fax/modem.

Tony's network mate is Mary (her real name). Mary likes the anonymity that comes with the Internet. Oops, sorry Mary! She too detests the meat market mentality of the bar, where beauty is in the eye of the beer holder. What attracts Mary to Tony? Good spelling and a 17 inch monitor.

What does the future hold for Internet relationships? Well, the Millennium Bug, the herpes of the year 2000, should put an end to all of this. Computers will no longer function and, thus, the chat lines will shut down. The streets will be filled with disoriented singles holding their floppy disks, murmuring through their dormant vocal chords, and looking for a byte. This would be a good time to open a pub. **OL**

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The Teen Scene:

By Brie Turcotte, KLO student

It's most parents' worst nightmare and it's happening right in their own home.

Dozens of teens are at a big party where everyone is drinking and smoking and some are even engaging in sexual activities. There is only one difference, this isn't real. It's all an Internet fantasy a group of teenagers linked together by their computers, partying as they please.

This was my first time in a chat room. I heard of them before, but they always kind of scared me because I'd heard so much about how adults used the Internet to lure children for sexual purposes. But I faced my fear and spent about an hour on Teen Chat, an age-based chat line intended for teens only, but it isn't hard for an adult to get in under a child's identity. One person's profile said he was 35 years old and he told everyone it was wrong, but was it?

I met people from all over the U.S. and one from Canada. They all pretend that it's real, like they really are all together at a big party, drinking, smoking and listening to music.

At first I start out just asking if anyone wants to talk, but I am ignored. It seems that if you want to talk to these people you have to play their pretend games.

So I try starting a conversation the same way as many others: "Does anyone have a smoke I can borrow?" And I am answered for the first time. "Sure here's a smoke, I don't burn anymore!" I reply with a quick thank-you. They all talk in slang, some of it I don't understand.

Some of the people online seem sick and perverted to me, their sole

interest is cyber sex. Even some young girls, 13 and 14 year olds calling themselves Blondeforu and 69girlz, are getting into it. These younger girls seem more inclined to talk about sex, maybe to get the attention of the older guys or to come across as more mature.

There are also some people who go into these chat rooms simply for fun and get angry at people making the crude comments. Sometimes arguments erupt. The older guys definitely dominate the younger girls and hold a sense of power over them, but the older girls will not stand for any sort of rudeness, they stick up for themselves.

No one in the chat room I was in had a normal "getting-to-know-you" conversation, it was all sexual or party talk;

"I'm going to the bar anybody want a drink?"

"Any smoothee's out there want to dance?"

Maybe it's just something I don't understand, maybe it pleases

some people, but it doesn't really appeal to me. I think that it's probably better than teens going to real parties, where they actually are drinking, smoking and having sex and I'm sure parents really thought about it they would feel the same way. But parents have to be aware there are young people who are abducted and raped by predators who use the Internet as a way to contact them.

After my experience, I still think chat rooms are kind of scary and it is not something that I am going to pursue.

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