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Mark Goebel reports

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Is it love...

Has the Internet ruined gay romance?

By MARK GOEBEL

For Stephen, a marketing executive at a large multinational company based in Midtown, it all started out innocently enough a year ago. Tired of bars, lonely, and bored with his sex life, at the urging of friends he decided to try Internet sex hook-up sites.

Stephen joined the city's most popular site, M4M4SEX. "It was exciting. All those hot men right they're on the screen, mine for the asking," said Stephen, 28. Handsome and in great shape, he had no problem hooking up. "Almost every time I wanted to connect, I did."

It didn't take long, however, for Stephen to fall into the Internet's black hole. "Like most guys my age, I dabbled in the scene. I went to the Roxy once in a while and took drugs casually. A few times I went home with somebody. We were both high and the sex is great."

Because his experience with sex and drugs was fun and seemed in control when Stephen discovered that many of the guys online, particularly in Chelsea where he lives, were into crystal- and GHB-infused sex marathons (PNP), he didn't give it a second thought.

Before long, he was playing a few times a week. "I also started doing it during weekdays, sometimes the night before a big meeting at work," he said.

"Not only did I get addicted to the sex, but before I knew it I had a problem with crystal." In less than nine months, Stephen had become a crystal-fueled sex addict a "tina whore."

He needed more and more sex with

as many different guys as possible. After he'd slept his way through the M4M4SEX regulars, he joined other sites. "Most of the time I was logged onto at least one sex hook-up site," he said. "It was a huge distraction. My productivity plummeted. My boss wondered what was going on." On top of it, Stephen's crystal addiction was costing him a fortune.

Peter, an actor in Hell's Kitchen, is a casual user. One night, he awoke at 2 a.m. "Before the Internet I would have just jerked off looking at porn and then gone back to sleep," he said. "I certainly wouldn't have gone out to a bar. But with the Internet, it was easy. I got online and 30 minutes later I had someone at my apartment to have sex with."

As easy as pizza delivery

According to Dr. Patrick Carnes, editor of "In the Shadow of the Net: Breaking Free of Compulsive Sexual Behavior," the Internet's accessibility, anonymity and affordability make it an alluring arena for compulsive sexual behavior. "For sex addicts, Internet sex hook-up sites are like crack cocaine," he said, "highly addictive, very difficult to give up with the potential to destroy lives. Once you get hooked, it's all about getting your next fix."

People with sex and intimacy issues are more likely to be sexually compulsive and get addicted to online hookup sites, noted Robin Cato, executive director of the Council on Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity. She added that single men living alone are at greatest risk "because there is nothing in place, no family, friends or partner to stop them from going online and getting lost in that world. The Internet makes it easy for people to tap into an addictive part of themselves they may not have known about or explored before."

Jeff Parsons, an associate professor of psychology at Hunter College and a researcher for an ongoing study on how sexual addiction affects gay men, says upwards of 20 percent of gay men exhib-



it some sexually compulsive symptoms, and 5 percent acknowledge that it has become a problem in their lives.

Parsons urges caution, however, in drawing quick conclusions. "Because the study of sexual addiction has just begun in earnest, the definition of what constitutes compulsive sexual behavior tends to be broad and is still fluid," he said.

For Stephen, Peter and others, it's a slippery slope that they're not even aware of. "I'd be less than candid if I said that I wasn't primarily looking for sex when I first started," Stephen said. "But in the back of my mind I was hoping I might meet Mr. Right or at least somebody who I would like to go out on a date with. Never did I think the Internet would take a bold of me the way it did." Stephen is now in a 12-step recovery program.

Randy, in the Bronx, hasn't found what he is looking for: love. "I want a physical and emotional connection with someone special," he said. "I am shy and I guess I have a fear of intimacy. In my loneliness I turned to the Internet. I don't use the dating sites. They seem so complicated."

An 'efficient' alternative to bars

Of course, not everybody surfing online sex sites ends up in rehab like Stephen or lonely like Randy. For many gay New Yorkers it's a great alternative to bars and clubs.

"Online sex hookup sites are everything that the Internet ever promised, a service that is personalized, customized and real time, bringing new efficiency to an essential human need," Katherine Mieszkowski wrote in a 2000 Salon article on M4M4SEX.

Chris Nobile, marketing director for M4M4SEX's biggest competitor on the East Coast, 80,000-member Boston-based Manhunt.net, agreed: "It's much more efficient than a bar. It's easy to find the build, look and sexual activity you're looking for. The site gives people another outlet for sex and there are many positive aspects to meeting peo-

ple this way, including knowing a person's HIV status before getting together with them since our members are asked to list it in their profiles."

"Cruising online sex sites is a lot better than hanging out in smoky bars where it is difficult to talk and most people just stand around afraid to meet anybody new," said Turtle Bay resident Michael. "And it is a lot easier to get laid online than at XL or Splash."

His best friend Pablo agreed: "Once you've figured how to navigate the bullshit — and admittedly there is plenty of it on the Web — it's a lot more efficient and cheaper than going out."

Joe, a 25-year-old computer programmer in Chelsea, has met some of his best friends online. "Typically we'd hook up a couple of times for sex, then we would get bored with each other sexually, but stayed friends."

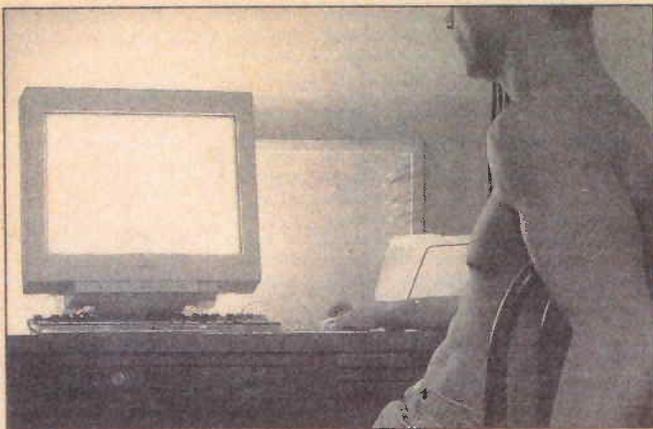
Bottom line: Seeking sex (and possibly friendship) online is no longer considered strange or shameful behavior. Social acceptance and efficiency, however, doesn't mean that surfing the Web for emotional and physical intimacy is healthy behavior, particularly with rampant partying and unsafe sex.

On a typical Saturday night around midnight, an admittedly non-scientific survey of two sites found around a quarter of the 500 people online specifying P&P and a not insignificant number into barebacking.

No conclusive studies have been done on the Internet and drugs, unsafe sex and compulsive behavior, but one is under way. Parsons is working with the Center for HIV/AIDS Educational Studies and Training.

Sex hookup sites make it easier for men to meet their sexual compulsive needs, he said. Also, sex addicts are more likely to engage in unprotected anal sex. He added that drug use among men in his study is high, even compared to the gay population as a whole with its high relative rates of usage. The study represents

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a broad range of the gay community including ethnicity, HIV status, income and education.

Health issues aside, what would be considered unacceptable behavior at work, the gym or even bars is the norm on Web sex sites. "People will say and do anything to get laid," said Queens resident Bob. "They can hide behind the Web's anonymity. I have never come across so many rude people. People who say they're on their way over and don't show up or give you a phony address."

If numbers are any indication, however, unseemly or unsafe behavior isn't much of a deterrent.

The granddaddy of sex hookup sites, M4M4SEX is approaching 200,000 members worldwide, 15,000 in New York alone. That's people who go to the trouble of uploading pictures, filling out a questionnaire and writing a short profile. According to Alexa.com, an independent Internet traffic monitor, New York-based M4M4Sex is among the top 1 percent of visited sites *in the world*.

Is it any wonder that M4M4Sex, launched four years ago in New York, San Francisco and Los Angeles, has spawned a host of competitors from coast to coast? Even Internet giants, gay and straight, can't resist the lure of high traffic and potential big bucks that online sex sites offer.

PlanetOut, the biggest gay Internet company, best known for its online dating service, has launched a sex hookup site, albeit one less racy than M4M4Sex.

And Toronto-based Lavalife, the world's largest provider of online dating services, cleverly named adam4adam, recently made its Web debut. PlanetOut vice-president of customer products, Jeff Kitterton, says that sex sites are his company's dating services' most serious competitors.

The Internet sex and dating phenomenon started about five years ago in AOL chat rooms. AOL enabled gays in remote areas across the country to communicate and meet other like-minded people. In urban areas, chat rooms tended to be used to arrange sexual liaisons. Gay chat rooms burst into the public spotlight in 1999 when 14 men in San Francisco who met in AOL chat rooms came down with syphilis.

While sex is clearly the biggest seller on the Internet, there are more than a few online junkies who haven't given up finding love. According to Kitterton, the number of profiles on Gay.com Personals and PlanetOut PersonalsPlus online matchmaking services passed the 2 million mark in January.

It's easy — maybe too easy

Joining an Internet sex hookup site takes about 15 minutes and costs upwards of \$10 a month (a few are still free). All you need to do is fill out a questionnaire (including your vital stats and the scenes you're into), give a brief description of yourself, upload pictures, and choose an online moniker. Screen names range from to-the-point (btm4top) to banal (bigdick) to

clever (pyrotechnic) to demeaning (nycumdump). Photos include XXX shots, passport photos, guys having sex, a guy in diapers, somebody wearing just a gas mask on, and a man covered in latex with slits for his eyes and mouth.

Operators of gay sex sites say they're aren't responsible for the behavior (or bad taste?) of their members. "If you have an addiction, whether it's drugs or sex, it's going to manifest itself in some way," said M4M4SEX's marketing director, Phil Henricks. "If they're not online, they'd be at a bar or bathhouse."

Stephen Sues, co-founder of Los Angeles-based Sex4HotMen, added, "Compulsive behavior is as old as mankind. We are no more responsible for the spread of disease or drug addiction than the phone company. We provide a means for people to communicate and connect. What they do once they have is their business."

While they believe it's not their role to try to control what their members do, sex-site owners say they act responsibly. Five percent of Sex4HotMen's membership fees go to AIDS service and substance programs. Both M4M4Sex and Manhunt have links to AIDS organizations.

"They could be doing a lot more," lamented Brett Larson, former community co-chair of New York's HIV Prevention Planning Group. "For example, it would be very easy for them to program their sites with pop-ups or instant messages about safe sex practices."

As far as graphic language (including invitations to engage in unprotected sex

and PNP) and demeaning photos are concerned, the site owners fall back on the First Amendment to absolve themselves of any responsibility. "M4M4SEX was created so that it would be uncensored," said Henricks.

Basically, no children or pictures depicting illegal activities are allowed. "Our members want to show themselves in the best possible light," said Henricks. "For some people it's their dick or asshole."

The old saw, "the loneliest people in the world live in big cities" rings true today. Many gay men (ask your friends) have turned to the Internet and sex hookup sites to deal with feelings of isolation. "There is a hole in my life. I am lonely," said Peter from Staten Island. "So I fill it with the Internet."

John of Manhattan, who surfs both dating and sex sites, says, "It gives me an outlet to meet other people, but also feeds my fear of intimacy since most encounters are short and very superficial."

Alan of Brooklyn Heights added, "From my own experience, if you're constantly online looking for sex then you're probably not emotionally available for dating."

Are online sex sites just the latest manifestation (remember phone sex lines, the tubs and the piers?) of our tendency to overemphasize the sexual part of our beings? Does the drive for the next sexual hookup take a person away from developing the emotional tools necessary to find a life partner and build a long-term loving relationship? Is it time for the gay community to develop a new consciousness about love, relationships and sex?

What happened to HOES RAYMOND DRAGON?

The demise of a well-known
design label points
up the pitfalls of
gay-identified brands
PART 1



