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## The New Position on Casual Sex

The rise of Internet dating has brought a sexual openness (not to mention one-night stands) to the younger generation not seen since the seventies heyday of Maxwell's Plum. But can there be too much of a good thing?

By Vanessa Grigoriadis

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Jessica Martin was in the mood for adventure. She cranked the Hives on her stereo, rolled a Drum cigarette, and stood in front of her bathroom mirror, the digital camera her parents got her for her birthday resting on the sink. Petite and curvy, with big eyes and a black bob -- Betty Boop working the electroclash look -- the 26-year-old technical writer pouted. She tweezed her eyebrows. She put a barrette in her hair. Finally, she held the camera at chest level and aimed at her reflection.

"It took a long time to upload the photos, because I had no idea what was up with that newfangled gadgetry. I'm just an old-fashioned girl," says Jessica (or so she wants to be called), though it must be said, she's nothing if not au courant. With a deep voice and an irrepressible laugh, she's the girl who hangs out with the guys, an adrenaline junkie from Fort Greene whose fashion philosophy is of the body-as-palette variety. "I was trying to get exactly the right look: I wanted to look sultry and mysterious, a little jaded, like I know too much for my own good, very Catherine Keener or young Faye Dunaway."

Even Dunaway circa *Network* would have approved of the bitch-goddess number she did on the questionnaire for her online personal ad, which asks things like her "favorite onscreen sex scene" and her "most humbling moment": "right now, being caused to remember my most humbling moment, I find it humbling (in the face of my supposed infallibility)." *Who you're looking for*: "Tall, hilarious, serene, good with technical shit, solvent enough to go out for sushi a couple times a month. NO oversensitive guys: I will eat you for dinner and go out for ribs afterwards." *Anything else you want us to know*: "Please bother someone else with your self-indulgent emotionally challenged view on the world. P.S. If this is not you, but your older brother or co-worker, let me know. I'll pay a referral fee in flautas if I at least get some nookie out of the arrangement."

Within seconds, her ad was live. "It was weird, seeing it pop up on the screen," says Jessica. "I read through it, and I was like, well, that's me, but it's not me. I guess it's the me I want to be." When she woke up the next morning, she had 50 responses from men who called her "intriguing," "sexy," "a cool chick I want to hang with."

"Yeah, it was pretty awesome," says Jessica, rolling another Drum at a bar around the corner from her house. "Look, I would like to make babies, but this is primo genetic material we're dealing with here -- quality control is a big issue. As much as I hope there's some lurking jewel out there, right now, I'm just lonely, curious, and horny."

What a difference a year makes. At the turn of 2002, only a few of my more desperate or socially inept friends had their own online personal ads. These days, I'd be hard-pressed to find one who hasn't at least dabbled in the genre. A recent casual foray into a few dating sites yielded two work colleagues, an editor I briefly dated, three people from a high-school summer acting program (bizarre), and one stand-up comic who dumped me because I "wasn't funny enough." Seeing him reduced to online dating, I must admit, gave me great pleasure.

Just as during the sexual revolution, when it was discovered that having sex before marriage didn't necessarily mean you'd end up emotionally damaged or consigned to eternal damnation, these days hooking up over the Internet is less Oliver Jovanovic and more Paris Hilton. Though a lot of people are certainly searching for soulmates online, it's also become a way, in Jessica's words, to "widen your sexual circle." For some women, it's now the 2003 version of the zipless fuck, an unapologetically no-strings-attached, purely sexual experience. Women, in other words, get to act like men.

### Sex Stories

**Generation Sexless:** No sex, please -- we're married! Between the kids and the economy, it's no surprise that New Yorkers' libidos are shrinking faster than their 401(k)s. (June 13, 2003)

**Naked City:** Recent stories by New York Magazine's sex columnist Amy Sohn.

**Where's Woody?:** *The Sex and the City* revolution has made plenty of men nervous. But when a trusted friend is nowhere to be found at the moment of truth, a young stud wants answers. (July 15, 2002)

### Hook Up!

**StrictlyPersonal.com:** Meet New York singles and make a match on New York Metro.

For women, Internet dating is providing the 2003 version of the zipless fuck, unapologetically no-strings-attached, purely sexual experience. Women, in other words, get to act like men.

"I always thought that the people on these sites were a whole different segment of society, unemployed psychos out in suburbialand," says lawyer Chris London, who runs a social-networking group. "I thought it was the people that you don't see out in the scene. But you know what? It is the people you see out in the scene. Every single Jewish woman I know in New York is on JDate, and then I'll go over to Lavalife, and there's a girl from my Hamptons house advertising herself as 'Pervygoddess.' An ex called the other day to ask if I'd e-mail her some photos I had from a vacation we took together, and I knew exactly what it was for. She didn't even try to deny it."

"I've gotten kind of out of control with the online stuff," admits a 24-year-old publicist. "I'll show up at the office and some of the people I work with will say, 'You look really cute today!' I'm like, 'Really? Do you think I should go on a date?' Then I'll hop online and within ten minutes yell out, 'I have a date!'"

It's all making *Sex and the City* seem a bit musty -- not only by creating a new genre of dating but also by democratizing the fabulous foursome's lives. These days, there's a dating service for every demographic (some with the emphasis on dating, some on servicing), from racy Nerve to randy Craigslist (once known primarily as the place to find good no-fee apartments) to the personals on this magazine's Website (and in our back pages). With posters in what seems like every subway car, Lavalife even offers the option of searching by sexual proclivity (conventional sex, domination/submission, or sex without intercourse, which I didn't know was possible). All of this activity has been rebranded with a new post-moral moniker, "play."

"There is a new, higher-metabolism social animal emerging in the tide pools of online-dating communities, no doubt about it, particularly among those under 26," agrees Rufus Griscom, co-founder of Nerve and chairman of Spring Street Networks, a feeder for personals on many sites, from Salon's and *The Onion's* to this magazine's. "Online socializing is a vehicle for turbo-charging the social experience rather than some kind of crutch."

In other words, these aren't people who necessarily have trouble getting laid -- they just want to get laid more. No one is interested in lengthy e-mail courtships: People want to meet right away to see if there's chemistry, so you'd better be as advertised, and that photo better be from this decade -- though "no one ever looks like their photo," complains Jessica. "This one guy looked like Johnny Depp in his photo, and then he showed up and looked like a chicken -- I was afraid he was going to peck my eyeballs out."

Unlike with nineties cybersex, the emphasis here is not on creating a new identity out of whole cloth but on being yourself -- at least the you that you want to be. "My whole ad has this faux-dominatrix vibe to it, which is funny, because I guess deep down I know I'm kind of a goofball," says Jessica, who in fact tells dumb jokes quite a lot and likes to play board games; the one false note in her profile is when she writes, "I will either rub you the wrong way, or rub your, you know . . ." She takes a drag of her cigarette. "I guess I just like the idea of being nastily outspoken. That ice-queen thing is me -- it's the part of me I'd like to flaunt more."

Fulfilling your fantasies is what this is about, after all. That's what led a 32-year-old newspaper editor to post her ad, at the beginning of December. It had funny lines, like the best lie ever told: "Of course I came." She added, "Vow From This Day Forward: I will never, ever do this again. Lie about it, I mean. I certainly hope to actually do it again!" Then there was *Why you should get to know me*. "I have declared December 2002 a morals-free zone, where I do what I want, when I want, with whom I want. I want to fuck you. Offer expires 12/31/02." (She received responses from 70 men and met 10 of them. "Most of them have been quite surprised that I have a personality and a brain -- I guess only dull, stupid women are supposed to be sexual? Whatever. I had the best sex of my life with one of them -- he discovered my G spot, which I didn't even know I had, I swear. I was like, 'This is what they're talking about in *Cosmo*.'")

Granted, most women aren't taking such extreme steps, but meeting men over the Internet does provide an easy answer to a difficult problem. "I don't want to give men that I might want to date the wrong idea by having sex with them, but I don't want to live without sex," says a friend of mine, who's found tawdry Internet affairs to be a perfect antidote. "Now, isn't that the most bizarre twenty-first-century quandary?"