



A seller's guide to sex online

As an American website curbs ads for erotic services, Helen Croydon tests Britain's appetite for cyber vice by advertising herself as a 'fun-loving blonde'

Another week, another online virginity auction. The Romanian teenager Alina Percea talked cheerfully to a celebrity magazine about the successful sale of her virtue to the highest bidder. Presumably she was inspired by the recent success of Natalie Dylan, a 22-year-old Californian who raised £2.5m (£1.57m) for hers. Alina, alas, didn't do quite so well: going, going, gone for a mere £8,800.

Still, Percea'schutzpah was greeted with nearly Benny Hill levels of enthusiasm in Britain. She rather fancied her winning bidder, we were told, a 45-year-old businessman who paid for her to fly to Venice.

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blonde" promised "my looks will seduce you, my services and skills will please you. One hour of fun with me is £100 only". Another flashed, "Special girl available now", further elaborating that she is "a Caucasian goddess with skills and an independent entertainer providing a NO RUSH, sensual encounter".

I was astonished at the directness of some of the posts. Prostitution may be legal here, unlike in America — where it is outlawed in most states — but English law bans soliciting in a "public place". This is the reason brothels here are advertised as saunas, and girls offer sensual massages, not sex. Craigslist says it "blocks ads that in our experience have a high likelihood of violating our terms of use" — which include a bar on pornography — but this clearly does not rule out expressions such as "I'm the best in town", as well as other far more obvious suggestions.

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message. "Not necessarily something in a bar under false pretences or getting sexual: I just want to feel naked and have more than 9,000 females and nearly 6,000 males send me in the ty "carding" in telephone boxes was banned

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Well, the US is certainly more short-tempered when it comes to selling sex online. Last week the classified website Craigslist finally bowed to pressure from anti-vice campaigners and removed the erotic services section from its pages in America.

Since June last year, police in 40 states have used adverts in this section of the site to conduct anti-prostitution stings. Female officers posed online as prostitutes to catch out male clients, while male officers posed as customers to catch women selling sex. There have been hundreds of arrests on both sides; the state of Illinois even threatened to file a lawsuit against Craigslist, claiming it was the single largest source of prostitution in America.

There is no doubt such sites are often distasteful and may lay vulnerable men and women open to harm. But I can't help feeling the Americans are overreacting. Certainly in Britain the attitude is more relaxed — so far, I'm told, craigslist.co.uk's erotic services section hasn't triggered a single complaint. The consensus seems to be that online flirtation can take many forms and if some consenting adults take it further than others, well, that's their business. Besides, is there really that much difference between posting a photo in hope of drinks and dinner on match.com and the more direct approach employed by those who use the erotic section of Craigslist?

That's certainly what I felt, so I decided to sign up last week to see what all the fuss was about. Was the craigslist.co.uk erotic services section really that degrading? To judge by its popularity, perhaps not: about 650 new advertisements are posted there daily, if last Wednesday is anything to go by. One self-styled "gorgeous young

man" experienced more than 100 responses violating our terms of use — which include a bar on pornography — but this clearly does not rule out expressions such as "I'm the best in town", as well as other far more obvious suggestions.

I had to edit my entry twice, as a lot of words seemed to be banned by Craigslist, including "naughty" and "discreet" — perhaps they are too suggestive — so I ended up with "SEXY FUN-LOVING BLONDE. Pretty, slim, English blonde. Seductive, adventurous and mischievous. I offer a great sensual massage with no strings fun. Charlotte." Tame by the standards of what I suppose I must call the competition, it took no longer than 10 minutes to compose.

Then there was the photo. Most girls seem to use underwear shots or topless images that range from mildly titillating to obscene. I wanted to use an image that would generate interest but by no means show my face. Since I don't have any racy underwear pictures to hand, the Sunday Times helped me out by sending a photographer. Posing in nothing but underwear was distinctly uncomfortable: it gave me a foretaste of how degrading this sort of thing can be.

I got my first response within 20 minutes of posting, in a call to my mobile. Martin claimed to be 45 and new to the scene. He had a girlfriend, but had decided to try Craigslist "to learn new tricks". He asked whether I was free that evening. "How much do you usually pay?" I asked. "Between £80 and £90," he said. I tried to push him up a little, but he was quick to inform me there's a recession on and prices have come down. He then asked if I'd do overnight stays. For one of those, he would be prepared to pay £400.

Keen to learn a little more about the men who use these services, I asked them a few more questions. Perhaps my journalistic skills aren't as subtle as I'd like to think because several callers were jumpy and two promptly put the phone down.

Still, I got a good idea of what many of them seek from sexual services. Charles, a polite 38-year-old, wanted a naked

massage. "Not necessarily something sexual; I just want to feel naked and have a chance to talk," he said. For that he was willing to pay up to £20. Andreas was married but had no sex life. He wanted to know if I practised domination and anal sex. Another man, bored in a hotel room, was disappointed when he found out I didn't have tattoos.

In total, I received six phone calls, two e-mails and two inquiries by text over a three-hour period — and I'm sure there would have been more, but the turnover on the site means you have to keep re-posting your ad to get a flow of responses. Still, given that the going rate seems to be £100 per hour per visit, my free listing generated a potential £1,000 in earnings.

While the thought of my putative clients' sexual demands physically repulsed me, morally and intellectually I still found it hard to see that the men who wronged me were doing anything wrong. As long as the girl is willingly providing her services and not in any danger, surely it's better for a man to find satisfaction through an unambiguous business transaction than by, say, wooing a stranger

In three hours my free listing generated a potential £1,000 in earnings

in a bar under false pretences or getting tangled in the messy emotions of an affair? Anna Bowden of Eaves, a London charity that provides housing for vulnerable single women, including prostitutes, strongly disagrees. "If you see the emotional and mental harm that sex work does to women long term, you'd know that we need to curb demand," she says. "Adverts on websites and local newspapers which clearly indicate sexual services increase demand and are unacceptable."

As for the women behind the ads, according to Sara Walker from the English Collective of Prostitutes, they are not the fresh college students or bored housewives up for an opportunistic bit of fun, and perhaps some extra cash, that they might initially seem. "Most women on these websites are not working alone. Even if the ad shows a single woman, most are with some sort of escort agency or work with a friend," she says. "Women turn to prostitution through desperation. A website like Craigslist won't tempt anyone to try it out of the blue. It doesn't work like that."

Still, the ease with which I set up my own ad on Craigslist and got £1,000-worth of business that very afternoon suggests that some out-of-work women with children to feed and bills to pay — or even just shoes to buy — might be tempted to dabble. It's not just Craigslist they can turn to, either. Adverts for sexual services proliferate on sites such as adultwork.co.uk. One of the UK's largest erotic websites, it features sections for different services. Users can click on escorts, webcam, phone chat or SMS chat. There's also a picture section and one for movies, where men and women offer to reveal images in exchange for money. On the day I looked, Adultwork's escort section carried advertisements for

more than 9,000 females and nearly 6,000 males available in the UK.

Last year, as part of an investigation into trafficked women for News at Ten, the ITN reporter Chris Rogers placed a fake advert for a brothel on Adultwork. Within two hours he'd received 400 bookings — enough to generate £40,000 of takings. In a single week, his fake brothel received more than 1,000 e-mails and phone calls from men in Manchester alone. Rogers tells me that the whole production team was shaken by the findings.

"Every man who called or e-mailed to make a booking appeared cool, calm and collected, as though they had done this many times before," he says. "They knew exactly what they wanted, and how the process worked. I was sickened and fed up speaking to these men who paid for women like meat from a butcher."

Whether advertising for sex is morally acceptable or not, it's interesting that the government continues to turn a blind eye to soliciting. The Home Office simply claims that a ban on advertising sexual services online and in local newspapers wouldn't be effective. A spokesman said: "The vast majority of adverts don't explicitly state that sexual services are available, referring to massages and saunas, making it extremely difficult to prove that a business is operating as a brothel."

But it's common knowledge that terms such as "massage", "in-calls" and "hourly rate" refer to sexual services. Besides, as I quickly noted on Craigslist, some adverts are even more blatant. "Special offer this week only: bareback for £100" seems to be a fairly clear proposition in one ad on Adultwork. Perhaps the Home Office doesn't understand the term "bareback". There is a precedent, of course. In 2001,

"carding" in telephone boxes was banned — although it seems this wasn't a move to crack down on soliciting itself, but simply a government initiative to clean things up because the cards, advertising sexual services, were offensive and undesirable and created a bad impression on foreign visitors. In 2002 police clamped down with a series of sting operations. Online ads evidently don't provoke the same sort of hostility in the civil service brass.

Perhaps, then, we need a job, as America received just over a month ago with the arrest of Philip Markoff, aka the "Craigslist killer". Markoff, a 29-year-old medical student, has been charged with the murder of one woman and the armed robbery of another, after he met them through postings on the Craigslist erotic section.

Of course, banning ads won't end the world's oldest profession. I note that the erotic services section of craigslist.com has now been replaced with a new "adult" category, where posts will be individually vetted by staff. The new section is already bustling with postings that look strikingly similar to the old ones, only shorter. "Hot sexy girl, call me," invites one New York ad. "I'm an exotic dancer, moonlighting as an escort, call me," suggests another. Plus ça change...

As for me, my experience online has taught me something important: yes, I still feel we shouldn't be told to stop advertising something when there's a clear demand and willing supply, but I am less swift to sneer at American "prudishness". Directly negotiating money for sexual acts over the phone made me want to squirm and put the phone down as quickly as I could. I wouldn't ban selling sex online — even if such a thing were possible — but I wouldn't wish it on anyone as a career.

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