lifeetc.

Rise of the online bullies

With the surge in use of internet forums and social networking sites comes a type of virtual troublemaker, says psychologist Dr Nicola Davies

What better way to unwind at the end of a busy day than by catching up with friends from the comfort of your living room? Online forums, chat rooms and social media sites are the most popular way to share the latest news and gossip in one handy place. From what your friends had for dinner, to advice from other hobby enthusiasts, you can talk to anyone, anywhere, about any topic.

But while online discussion sites can create a wonderful sense of community, there is a darker side. Some forum members go online just to antagonise and upset others. This breed of cyber bully, who logs on for the sole purpose of victimising others by making a dedicated effort to identify vulnerable groups or individuals and harassing them, is known as a 'troll'.

Unlike their online persona, a troll is unlikely to be confident in the real world. More often than not, they're the last person you'd suspect – the timid neighbour, the people-pleaser, the quiet one among your circle of friends. Why? Because they now have a place where they can be the one in control, putting other women down in order to make themselves feel better. If they feel unattractive, they will target your appearance. If they feel like bad mothers, they will criticise your mothering skills.

Avoiding a troll who has signed up to your network isn't always easy. Message board troublemakers thrive on staying close to the minds of those who may be thousands of miles away, giving them a sense of power and causing serious distress. These women have been unable to escape being bullied or belittled themselves and want the same for those they victimise.

'Trolls can grow increasingly confident over time,' says Dr Peter Stephenson, associate professor of cyber investigations at Norwich University, in the US. So, the best form of defence is to ignore their negativity. Rather than retaliating and allowing them to feel a sense of accomplishment, take the upper hand and don't respond at all.

Troll (noun)
A person who victimises groups or individuals in chat rooms and forums

IN MY CASE

### 'She wouldn't leave us alone'

KERRY AVERY, 35, a nurse from Stevenage, Hertfordshire, was tormented online when she was looking for friendship

'As a single mum, I turned to the internet to spend time socially with other grown-ups. Every evening, I'd tuck the kids into bed and escape to my favourite online message board for single mothers. It was the perfect way for me to meet people, until someone joined who seemed intent on causing trouble. They'd type an unfriendly response to every new message that was posted. "You're pathetic," they wrote to one emotional member, "no wonder you have no friends in the real world". I confronted them, but this made things worse. "Learn to spell before you start using computers," the troll replied. I even tried to befriend them, thinking they were attention-seeking because they, too, were lonely. This didn't work, either. My new online friends gradually disappeared as the message boards became more stressful than enjoyable, and in the end I left, too. Now I feel angry that they have destroyed something that I really enjoyed.'
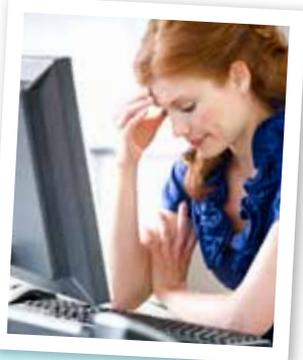
5 things to remember

1 There's no rush. One of the advantages of posting online is that you have the luxury of time – don't hurry to post a comment you may regret.

2 Before pressing send, ask yourself, 'Would I say this in person?' If the answer is no, take the time to think about your words more carefully.

3 Remember, your post is likely to stay there for a long time. Once you press send, there's no taking it back.

4 Think twice about sharing your location on status updates or social network sites.

5 If a member seems intent on getting your back up, don't give them the satisfaction they want by responding.

Cyber troublemakers: WHO'S WHO?

Trolls: Victimise vulnerable groups or individuals in chat rooms and forums. The 'concern troll' deliberately tries to raise fear and doubt among forum members, while the 'career troll' spends extended amounts of time planning how to disrupt the group.

Cyber-stalkers: Take deliberate steps to cause stress or fear.

Flamers: Post abusive comments to provoke quick, angry responses.

Griefers: Irritate and harass players of online games.

Sock puppets: Assume multiple identities to sway the opinions of the group.

Confessions of a troll

'Andrea', 32, became a 'career troll' after a joke she posted on a forum was taken the wrong way and she decided to take on the persona others were accusing her of. 'It was good to play the bad guy. In real life, I'm the quiet one sitting in the corner, whereas online, I could be anyone I wanted. Befriending new forum members and getting them on my side was a surefire way to wind up the other members. Whenever someone new joined, I'd type things like, "Be careful of this lot. They aren't very friendly." I just wanted to stir up trouble. It felt empowering to be in control. Seeing people who had it in for me rise to the bait gave me satisfaction.'

'I became a stand-up comedian'

After going through a messy divorce, 53-year-old Bernie Pendle from Ramsgate, Kent, managed to turn her life around with laughter

Bernie loves making people laugh

'Standing on stage in front of a packed audience, sweat trickled down my forehead. I put it down to the glare of the spotlight – but I knew it was nerves. No matter how many times I'd been up on stage, I still felt terrified. Crossing my fingers, I hoped I wouldn't forget any of my jokes, and tentatively started my set with a gag about the pitfalls of commuting to work. As the crowd chuckled, I started to relax. Brilliant!

I'm older than most of the comedians backstage but that doesn't bother me. In three years, I've gone from being a CEO of an industry body to starting my own business, and I've found a new passion – making people laugh.

Getting married at 19 and having three kids in my twenties meant that my career was put on hold. I was glad to be a stay-at-home mum, but when the little ones started school, and I got a part-time job, I was itching to do more.

After studying for a Masters in English, I worked my way up to being the CEO of a non-profit organisation and began travelling the country, giving speeches to rooms packed with business people.

But while my work was fulfilling, my marriage began to fall apart and my husband and I divorced. I decided to fill my time with a new hobby. Friends have always remarked that I have a great sense of humour, so I thought a comedy course would be perfect.

Although I was the only woman in a class of ten, I didn't let that deter me. I developed my jokes and signed up to an open mic night in a London pub. My children were mortified, but came to cheer me on. I was a nervous wreck, but thankfully, my character based on an agony aunt who gives bad advice to men went down a storm, and my skills commanding a boardroom came in handy keeping the audience's attention.

Of course, I've had bad nights when each joke sinks like a lead balloon, but I haven't let that stop me – the nights when the audience is rolling in the aisles more than make up for it. I've graced the stages at the Edinburgh Festival and London's Leicester Square Comedy Club. I might not be able to make a living from stand-up but I'll never stop performing. Making people smile is reward enough.'