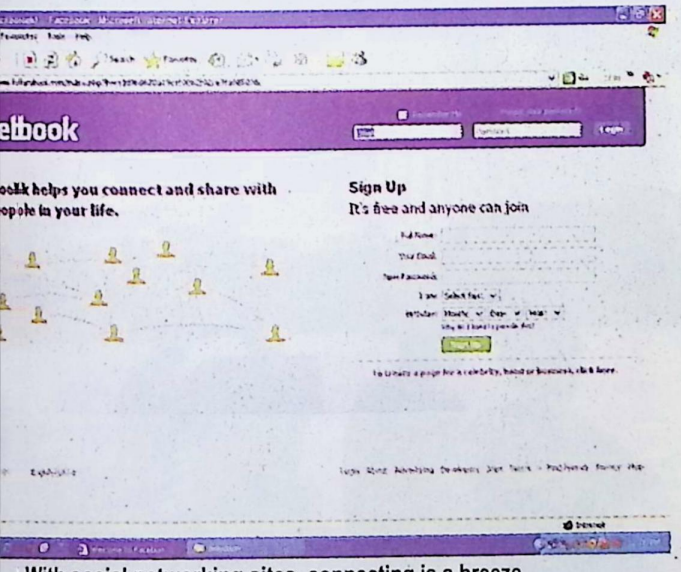


Photo: Zahedul I Khan



With social networking sites, connecting is a breeze.

sensual package. The mobile phone is not simply a gadget; it is also a style icon that is changing our cultural norms and values.

Sania Ahmed, a 24-year-old graphics designer who works for a multinational company, believes the proliferation of communications technology has opened up whole new vistas for young people. "At the age of 16 I would be pretty well insulated," she said. "Even if I worked, I would have little chance of interaction with others especially men. Now, thanks to email, facebook and my mobile phone I can stay in touch. I have greater control over my life."

Sania, however, knows of many examples among her circle of friends where the new found freedom has been abused, and she says bad attitudes are to blame. "With freedom comes responsibility," she says. "I couldn't live without my mobile phone. But a lot of people abuse the mobile. I get so many annoying calls on my phone from strangers-- some are downright scary. When mobile phone operators started offering free calls after midnight, a lot of people just dialed random numbers in the hope of connecting with a girl."

Sania's colleague Lina says she has received late night calls after she gave her number at a 'Flexiload' shop to refill her phone credit. "They keep calling, no matter how many times you brush them off. There is this strange idea that if they are persistent, the girl might respond. These weirdos live in fantasy worlds."

Such attitudes may be propagated by B grade commercial movies where the guy gets the girl through sheer persistence and muscle power, no matter how wide the gulf in terms of education and social status.

"Most Indian and Bangladeshi commercial movies are built around the idea of romantic love," says Rajaul Akmal, a student of Dhaka University. "Thanks to cable TV and DVDs, this is having a profound effect on teenagers in particular. If you're not in love, you're missing something. You get into college or uni, and if you're not involved with someone, you're not cool."

This craving for romantic relationships leaves young adults and adolescents vulnerable. Many make mistakes that haunt them for a lifetime. Saad, 25, was known as a Romeo on campus. He was popular and dated many girls. He also recorded video clips on his mobile and uploaded them to YouTube. Although such activity may not be the norm, experts say there is enough evidence to suggest young adults are often taken advantage of by predators.

Often the problem is the sense of shame many feel due to the fact that mingling of the sexes is still not accepted in society. This opens people up to blackmail. "I was sitting under a tree in the Botanical Gardens with my girlfriend when a couple of guys came up to us," says Tanim, a student of BBA at a private university. "They handed me a couple of cans of Coca Cola and said I had to pay Tk.200. When I protested, they started to make loud comments about me and my friend. I paid up and left the spot."

Such risks make a lot of young people stick to cyber space for their romantic interaction. It is undeniable that the internet and mobile phones have opened up a whole new social frontier. But without proper knowledge and safeguards, these mediums can be fraught with peril.

In the anonymous world of online dating and romantic text-messaging, anyone can masquerade as ultra-cool. And more sinister than that, a sociopathic stalker can pretend to be the man or woman of your dreams.

"There is a lot of false information out there," says Parvez, a student of BRAC University. "A lot of people create fake profiles on the Net, or give false info on the phone. Many of us do it to protect ourselves. But here's the catch: if the person you're talking to turns out to be the special someone, do you want to have to tell them that you've lied from the word go?"

Many say it would be wrong to blame the internet or mobile phones for this situation. "Getting involved with someone via the internet is no more or less safe than going out with someone you met at a party," says Sania.