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The Saga of Sister Kiki

By **DAVID BROOKS**

In 1900, Theodore Dreiser wrote “Sister Carrie,” about a young woman who left the farm and got mauled by the crushing forces of industrial America: the loneliness of urban life, the squalid conditions of the factory, the easy allure of the theater, the materialism of the new consumer culture.

If Dreiser were around today, he might write about Kiki Ostrenga. Kiki, who was the subject of [a haunting profile](#) by Sabrina Rubin Erdely in the April issue of Rolling Stone, was a young teenager who got mauled by the some of the worst forces of the information age.

Lonely at school, she took refuge by creating an online persona, Kiki Kannibal, posting photos of herself with various hairstyles and looks — goth one day; sexually charged, Lady Gaga-style temptress the next.

Though 13, Ostrenga was a phenomenally good shape-shifter. The photos often show her in her underwear or short skirts, with lurid make-up, edgy poses and pouty come-hither expressions. In them, you see the child’s ability to mimic the looks and attitudes of what she admires — in this case the cult of high-fashion celebrity as glamorized in Vogue or Cosmopolitan, on E!, TMZ, “Real World” and a thousand other outlets.

In sports, speed and strength are king. In music, talent and application are king. But online, eyeballs and page-views are king. Achievement is redefined as the ability to attract attention. And, with today’s technology, this sort of celebrity is not just a dream. Young people can create it for themselves.

Kiki must have sensed the tremendous erotic capital that a pretty, vulnerable, barely pubescent girl possesses on the Internet — even if she didn’t understand the consequences of her appeal. Sure enough, she became a MySpace sensation. Two million people are recorded to have logged on to her live stream video. Before long, there were 530 Facebook profiles from people claiming to be her (none of them were). She became an object of celebration, ridicule and hatred.

People talk about the online “community,” but it’s more accurate to see the response as a guerrilla war. Ostrenga made an aggressive bid for attention. Other people made a bid for attention by savaging her. Most of the viciousness hurled her way can’t be quoted here, but the article in Rolling Stone accurately described the mob-like behavior: death threats, savage sexual appraisals. “I know where you live, and I’m gonna kill” your cat, one person flamed. “Kiki go die you ugly [expletive],” another wrote.

Ostrenga inspired a wave of ridicule and defense, which spilled over into real life, including a punch to the head at a concert and the word “slut” painted in giant letters across her garage.

She was contacted by an 18-year-old man named Danny Cespedes, who charmed Kiki and her parents and became intertwined with their household. Unbeknownst to them, Danny had tried to seduce a string of young girls, some as young as 12. After her mother discovered that he had forced himself on Kiki one night, the Ostrengas pressed charges. As he was being arrested, he jumped off the second floor of a parking garage and ended up in a coma. He died two months later.

Next, she was victimized by the owner of a for-profit, teen-exploitation site called Stickydrama. The site’s owner both organized mass hate sessions against Kiki and invited her to live with him and become one of the site’s exhibitionist playthings. “If I can’t have you, I will destroy you,” he wrote in a Twitter message, according to Rolling Stone.

Addicted to the attention and now running an online jewelry business, Kiki couldn’t get offline, even while being painfully aware of the distinction between celebrity performance and the two-way loving relationships that she longed for. Her parents couldn’t seem to take the reins, even after they saw her online presence was not just a way of being creative.

In the end, they had to move to escape the threats. They were bankrupted in the process. Kiki lost any semblance of a normal adolescence.

She is an extreme case of an enormous uncontrolled experiment that is playing out across the world. Young people’s brains are developing while they are immersed in fast, multitasking technology. No one quite knows what effect this is having.

The culture of childhood is being compressed. Those things that young people once knew at 18, they now know at 10 or 12. No one quite knows the effect of that either.

Most important, some young people seem to be growing up without learning the distinction between respectability and attention. I doubt adults can really shelter young people from the things they will find online, but adults can provide the norms and values that will help them

put that world in perspective, so it seems like trashy or amusing make-believe and not anything any decent person would want to be part of themselves.

Kiki's story is not only about what can happen online, but what doesn't happen off of it.