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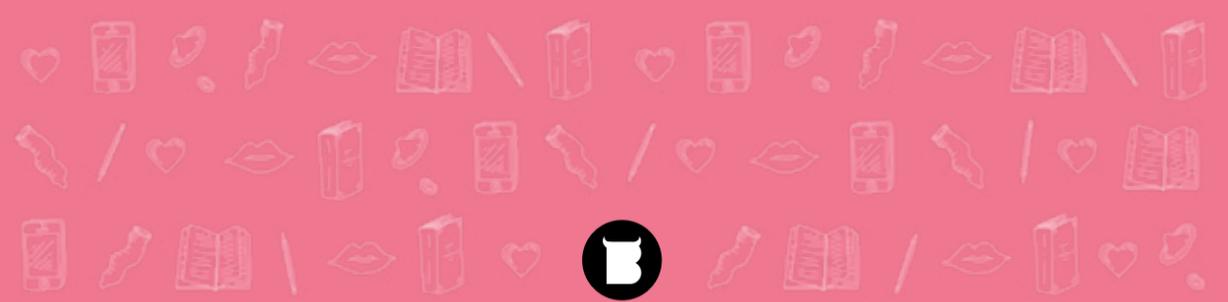
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SOCIAL SEX AT SYDNEY



HANNAH EDENSOR LOOKS AT 'HOOK-UP' CULTURE AND WHY WE SHOULDN'T FEEL ASHAMED ABOUT IT.

IT STARTS WHEN WE'RE JUST CURIOUS CHILDREN, asking our parents where babies come from, before eventually progressing to the first awkward fragments of sex-ed in the last years of primary school. By the time we reach high school, sex is on our minds more than ever, and we turn to friends, siblings and the Internet for answers.

In our teenage years, we're taught that sex is something special to be shared between two people in love – often married – and sometimes we believe the crap our parents spin. But then we graduate, go to uni, and discover that sex isn't as sacred as we've been led to believe. At university, where hormones still rage and sex is splayed across the landscape of student life, the word *casual* enters our vocabulary in a completely new way.

Casual sex. Who does it? What is it? Is it the new alternative to monogamy? According to the media, university is one big orgy, where students slink from one bed to another, and sexual partners are as transient as Campos coffees.

Amanda Holman from the University of Montana recruited and interviewed 274 students to learn more about the culture of sex at universities. More than half reported having engaged in casual sex or 'hook-ups' over the course of the year, however they also found that there was more talk than action. "Students greatly overestimated the pervasiveness of hook-ups within the general student culture," the study said, suggesting that casual sex is prevalent, but the hype surrounding its presence on campus is more moral panic than moral problem.

"Alcohol is a huge player," Holman told ABC News US. "If you become part of this hook-up culture, and you go to parties and you drink a lot and you're not fully aware of it, you probably don't have protection, and you are more likely to engage in risky behaviour." And Holman believes that this perpetuating culture of sex among students will only lead to further risky behaviour, with a lack of personal commitment being potentially damaging.

But when you step outside the media bubble, and actually talk to people who are living the student life, it seems this isn't as prevalent a culture as many might think. "I don't think casual sex is specifically isolated with students – I think it's a common phenomena that happens in all age groups," University of Sydney student Charlotte* said. "Casual sex is a part of modern dating and relationships."

But hindsight is a beautiful thing, and Charlotte didn't always see casual sex as a lifestyle choice for over 30s. "I thought uni *was* the place that all casual sex happens," Charlotte admits. "I definitely thought I'd have a *ménage à trois* in my first year."

"The media and movies definitely depict uni as a loose place where everyone is having an orgy and double penetrating each other, which is hilarious but I don't think anyone really takes it as fact."

Casual sex is a prevalent practice of students, there's no denying it. I myself have taken part in the odd one night stand, as well as sleeping with someone without the parameters of a relationship. But I'm also not decisively against monogamy, and it's this middle ground where a lot of students find themselves.

"For many it's a time to experiment and try out things and spend time with like-minded people," Sydney University student Emma* said. "You get to play around a bit and figure out what you want and like."

But despite this culture of cavalier sexual lifestyles, there's also an element of shame involved.

The public too often throws a blanket of disgrace over the student population for its promiscuous sexual behaviours, and students tend to feel ashamed of their sexual lifestyle choices. The fact that not a single interviewee in this article was bold enough to disclose their identity shows just how strong the air of taboo is, as it lingers like a fog over campuses, and follows us home on our walks of shame.

There it is again, that word *shame* directly linked to the act of casual sex. How else are we meant to perceive this sexual student culture if we're constantly perpetuating this notion of indignity?

"The media projects blame on the student-aged population for increasing the incidence of sexually transmitted diseases, and people view these student activities in a negative light," University of Sydney student Kate* said, expressing her irritation that students are the main age group shamed for their sexual choices. "It seems like such a hidden thing, and when it is brought to light people seem to look down on people who engage in sex."

Another Sydney University student Sam* insists that the public's perception on casual sex shouldn't be solely attributed to students. "I feel like casual sex is definitely a thing that happens at uni but it is definitely a thing that happens well after uni too and perhaps this latter incidence isn't as spoken about or isn't newsworthy,"

Sam said.

It's a fair assumption that students have a lot of sex. We're young, we're experimental, and we're at an age where relationships are not taken as seriously. Sure, this is a grand stereotype, but the shoe fits. University of NSW graduate Tony* supports this idea of sexual experimentation. "When you are younger, you are less likely to have 'found the one' and aren't tied down to one person, so one would be more available to have multiple sexual encounters in a shorter amount of time," he explains.

With apps like Tinder and Grindr, casual sex is geared towards younger generations.

Parties and events on campus are also hot spots for casual hook-ups, with many students using these parties to locate their next one night stand. "At any parties on campus there will be people engaging in sexual activities so that culture is prevalent," Kate says.

It seems the only things we can deduce from looking at casual sex on campus is that students have more opportunity, and less responsibility, making casual sex the perfect way to explore yourself sexually. Everyone experiences youth in different ways, and whether you're engaging in casual sex or not, as long as you take care of yourself, it shouldn't be anyone else's place to judge.

Senior Vice President of Clinical Development, Elements and Behavioural Health Robert Weiss wrote an article on whether casual sex was healthy. He too saw it as an independent lifestyle choice that depended on the person. "If casual sex doesn't violate your personal sense of integrity in terms of how you treat others, how you honour your commitments, and your individual moral code, then what you're doing is probably not going to cause you either short-term or long-term internal emotional distress," Weiss said.

Or, for a more student-friendly conclusion: "If you're fucking, and happy and safe, then go for it," Charlotte says. And when it comes to casual sex, isn't that really all we're looking for? ●

*Names have been changed

"I DON'T THINK CASUAL SEX IS SPECIFICALLY ISOLATED WITH STUDENTS – I THINK IT'S A COMMON PHENOMENA THAT HAPPENS IN ALL AGE GROUPS."