

Slag

Millennials are perceived as the generation that has more casual sex and avoids committed relationships, but how does this generation perceive female sexuality?

words Raquel Pacheco

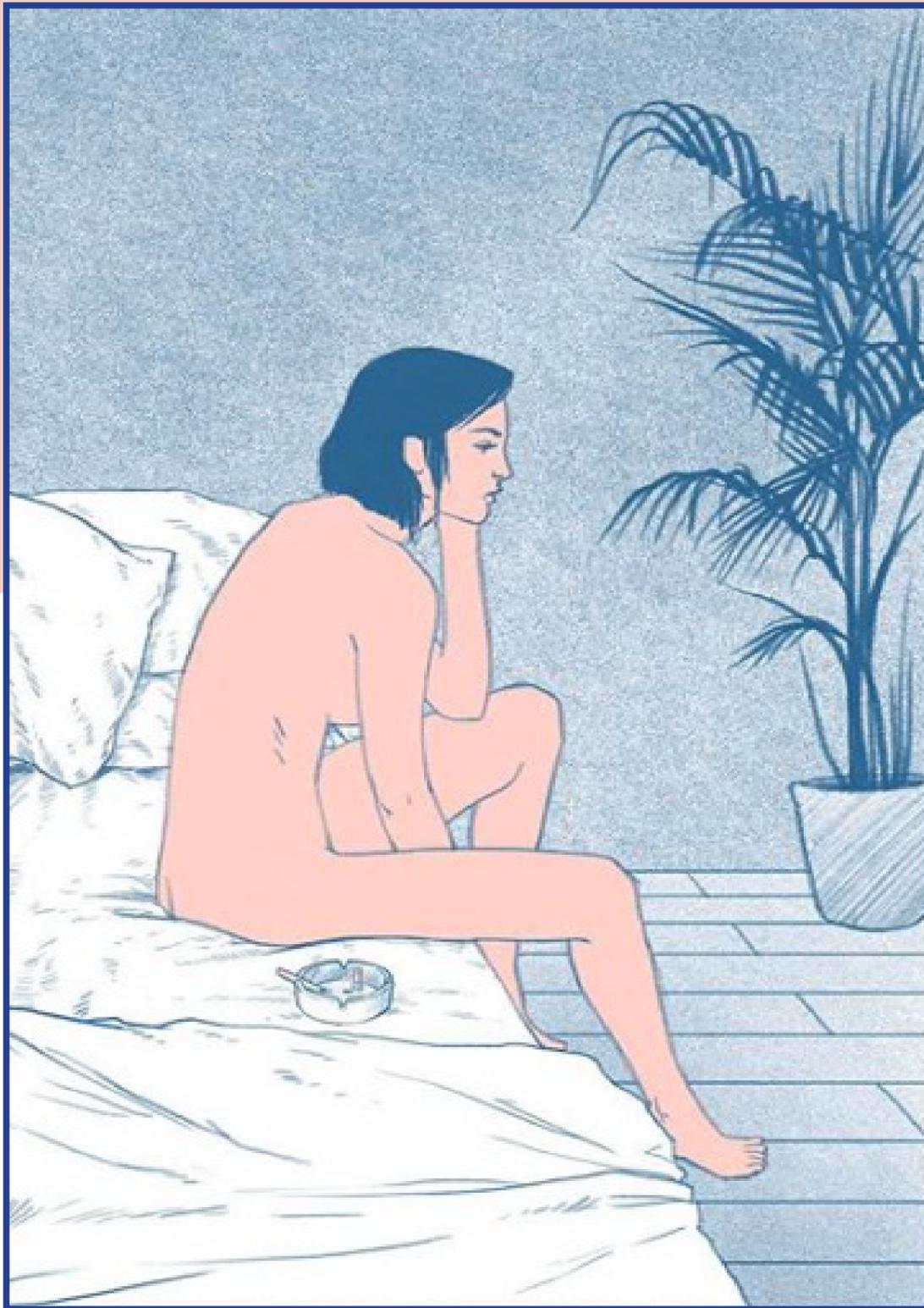


Illustration Sarah Maxwell

Alanna Thomas had hit a problem. On a breezy day in early December, sitting in the small coffee shop next to Great Queen Street in Covent Garden, she was patiently waiting for the man she had been speaking to for the last two weeks. The man (let's call him Chris), aged twenty-two, was her latest match on the successful dating app Tinder. "When he finally showed up, we got on so well" she recalls. "We spent hours talking about our jobs, music and the countries we had visited. I really did think we liked each other." The date was simply delightful, she told me, and after several cappuccinos and two blueberry muffins, Chris asked her a question which she would have never predicted. "He asked me the number of people I had slept with. I didn't expect that at all and didn't know how to react. I thought it was very straightforward but I didn't think it through and told him". Chris seemed uncomfortable, even slightly distressed. "Shortly after, we left the coffee place and went our separate ways. I tried texting him just to tell him I had a really nice time. To my surprise, I had been blocked".

This got me thinking. It is a terrible thing to feel criticised or judged for your sexual history and I've always felt especially intrigued by the way different generations perceive something as delicate and controversial as sex. My generation, the generation Y (best known as Millennials) have seen movements which fight against sexual harassment and slut-shaming. We are actually the ones who fight to

become more sexually liberated, yet, why does female sexuality still get so heavily judged? What is wrong with a high number of sexual partners? And most important of all, what makes it so unattractive to the younger generation that a woman can be sexually open?

On a recent rainy day in London, as I walked past the narrow canal in Blomfield Road, I tried to comprehend the reasons behind this view. I am a twenty year old female who, as many women throughout their lives, has been severely judged for even the most banal choices. There is a very noticeable sense of shame women have developed when it comes to their sexuality which is becoming increasingly alarming. In a widely read Bustle article from 2016, Lea Rose Emery argued that men and women still lied about their number of sexual partners but in different ways. According to a survey by Superdrug Online Doctor with over 2000 participants, thirty-two percent of women and forty-one percent of men had lied about this. Interestingly, eighteen percent of men lie to increase their number of sexual partners whereas nineteen percent of women decrease their number. Are we facing an unnoticed block towards gender equality? Probably, and as I kept walking by the canal and the rain rapidly intensified I started wondering what people, my generation truly thought. "I personally think it's very unattractive if a girl has slept with too many guys. It just shows the girl can't be in a proper relationship and that she is a bit slutty.

She would probably cheat," Chris Bean, a twenty-five year old estate agent told me. "I don't think I would be with a girl that has slept with more than thirty people. I just wouldn't feel comfortable with it, it would always be at the back of my mind," stated James Fergusson, a twenty-one year old student. "I've been with my boyfriend nearly two years, and I know that if I was completely honest with him about my sexual history he would break up with me. I just know it." explained Daisy Bradley, a twenty-two year old flight attendant.

This was fascinating. Years battling against gender-based double standards and fighting for feminism, yet, we seem stagnant, stuck in a mentality where women are not allowed to enjoy sex as men do and where women feel forced to embarrassingly lie. As I dived deeper into this hidden, disheartening view, I contacted the psychosexual therapist and couple counsellor Geoff Lamb. "There has always been a double standard in relation to male and female sexuality. Stereotypically, a man who enjoys sex and has a high number of sexual partners is called a "player" and a "stud", whereas a woman who does the same is called a "slag". Regrettably, this continues to this day" Lamb explained to me. "Why do you think this happens?" I asked fervently. "In terms of a cause, I think it's partly down to the fact that we still live in a patriarchal society and more specifically, both young men and women receive a sex and rela-

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ship education, which places more avoidance of STD’s, and more recently harassment and exploitation than on pleasure and enjoyment for both sexes. Equal weight needs to be given to the pleasurable, enjoyable aspects of sex. When I talk about sex education, I also include the example of the conscious and unconscious messages young people internalise from their parents and carers, which are probably more important.” Lamb was right. Sex, as a topic, has always been treated with censure and discontent. It is and probably will still remain a taboo subject. From an early age, it has been taught to focus on the basics of sex and the avoidance of pregnancy or as Lamb pointed out, the prevention of STD’s, but sex has never been portrayed as something pleasurable or enjoyable. As we were speaking, we both agreed on the main reasons for this attitude. “The closed-minded view can be largely attributed to society’s fear and insecurity about sex and pleasure. What I observe is that sex, including pornography, is much more “in your face” than it was and role models in the media, again, including porn, create “ideals” which can never be realistically achieved in a loving fulfilling relationship”.

This sounded familiar. These alarm bells had sounded before. Kian de la Cour, professional psychologist and sexologist and member of The Association of

Somatic & Integrative Sexologists, already spoke to me about this- the effects media and porn have on the younger generation. “Our society has a double standard when it comes to sexual expression where men are rewarded for sexual progress and women shamed. I think that sex education should focus on our varied individual humanity beyond gender & sex roles, embodied consent and a focus on pleasure as our birthright. The pervasive influence of social media and porn has led to a generation even more alienated from embodied intimacy than previous generations and more skewed towards imagined performative markers, basically how they imagine they would be seen and esteemed by others.” Was this true? Was porn and social media detaching us from real intimacy?

Earlier this month, I found myself drinking a fairly overpriced pint of lager and speaking with an old friend about this. She gave me an idea. “You know, I think insecurities have to do a lot with it. It’s very difficult not to compare yourself to the rest and if someone has more experience than you, it is inevitable not to end up wondering if you will be good enough. It’s just our nature.” What if this primitive criticism and the judgmental view was linked to personal self-doubt? And what if it wasn’t about the woman’s sexual history

but the man’s own insecurities? As I left the crowded bar, I started contacting the people I previously interviewed with the hope that they would agree to talk to me for a second time. To my surprise, they all did. “Yes it is true that if you are with a girl with more experience than you, you naturally feel more intimidated because you don’t know if you’ll be good enough or if she’ll compare you to someone else she’s been with. It’s always at the back of your mind” explained to me James Fergusson. “I don’t know, maybe. It is obviously intimidating but at the same time no one wants to be with a girl that would just sleep around with anyone” stated Chris Bean. It became clear to me that our generation had not only been heavily affected by a wrong sex education but also by the consistent use of social media which undoubtedly led to low self-esteem amongst the young people. It is indeed in our nature to compare ourselves to the rest.

De la Cour did mention it- the side effects of the media: “It could be positive if the individuals realised that the porn & media industry mis-represent sex as a performative act.” Earlier this month, in an article for The Guardian, Amy Fleming wrote about the consequences porn had in young men which could lead to impotence. She stated “Lone viewers of pornography become accustomed to



Illustration Alice Wietzel

I keep dreaming about you.



Illustration Sarah Maxwell

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being fully in control of their sexual experience. Being faced with a real, complicated human being, with needs and insecurities, could be deeply off-putting.” Media is in fact altering profoundly our perception of sex and as I kept discussing it with De la Cour, it became evident. “I have to say that this generation in particular, according to several studies, is the one with fewer sexual partners and I esteem it could represent their disillusionment with sexual interaction if they base their expectations on porn and find dissonance and dissatisfaction with real sexual interaction.”

Millennials- the generation with fewer sexual partners. I was shocked. Throughout my teenage years I remember listening to the term “Millennials” associated with words like careless, wild and promiscuous, but never sexually indifferent. In 2018, Dami Olonisakin, in an article for The Guardian, wrote about the way stress and anxiety affected Millennial’s sexual life. De la Cour did say it- the generation Millennial was in fact having less sex, with fewer sexual partners than young adults thirty years ago. However, did social media truly have something to do with this? It is in fact true that the young people of each generation are often influenced by different elements that complicate the experiences they live in, in the case of my generation, one of these elements seems to be the constant use of social media and the continuous exposure of privacy and intimacy.

It is very complicated to flee from such widespread exposure which turns every single interaction into a forum of different opinions, and such a sensitive and controversial subject as sex is a very easy target for negative attitudes. In 2015 a study made by Dr Jean Twenge revealed that Millennials were in fact having less sex with fewer sexual partners in comparison to the last generation. However, my generation has been raised and has fought for movements which focus on sexual freedom, so why aren’t we as interested in sex as the previous generations were? Ironically, we are the ones who have been branded as “the hook-up generation” due to our view on casual sex and relationships yet, we are still the ones which enjoy it the least. The name doesn’t really suit the data. The truth is, unfortunately, stress and anxiety do play a big role in our lives. We are more concerned with finding a job, studying a course at university than enjoying our private lives. As Norman Spack, the associate clinical professor of pediatrics at Harvard Medical School said to Forbes in an interview in 2016 “The nature of communication is now anti-sexual. People are not spending enough time alone just together. There’s another gorilla in the room: It’s whatever it’s turned on electronically.” In an interview with the Post, Helen Fisher, an anthropologist at Rutgers University, stated that she viewed the Millennials outlook on sex, more specifically their choosiness, as a positive advancement for today’s young adults. “It’s probably

a good thing...I think it is going to lead to better first marriages (and perhaps to slower divorce rates than, for example, the Boomers’). They’ll get to the sex. I’m positive of that.” Fisher continued explaining how the lack of sexual interest the Millennials may have could be seen as a positive concept since it portrayed a bigger interest in professional developments and life goals. “It’s a highly motivated ambitious generation and a lot of them are afraid that they’ll get into something they can’t get out of and they won’t be able to get back to their desk and keep studying.” This worried me. Not only we were the ones that were enjoying sex the least but we blamed people who were enjoying it, more specifically women.

As I walked past the narrow canal in Blomfield Road for a second time, I remembered how much I admire Lars von Trier’s work. I remembered when I first watched the film *Nymphomaniac* which he had written and directed. It was outstanding. The essence of female sexuality so tastefully captured, and what it entailed to be a female who enjoys sex and to be proud of it. This made me wonder- are we ever going to stop using the term “slag” to purposely offend women? When is this going to change? Will our view on sex evolve? The dirty little secret of female sexuality today doesn’t involve the fact that women are having sex and that they might enjoy it, but that it is not seen the right way. That, is the problem.