

Love me, Tinder

High schoolers have always experimented with romantic activity, a rite of passage, testing their wings, diving headfirst into the all-things-adult world on the college horizon and beyond. Today's youth refer to these 'hook-ups'—a little kissing, touching and little else. But what has changed is how profoundly these no-strings-attached encounters may affect a generation of teenagers who increasingly prefer empty flings to the drama, constraint and emotional investment required of deeper commitments.

By | Grace Conley & Layton Sussman

Vanessa Montez* sat on her bed plowing through her nightly pre-cal homework when her phone buzzed across her dresser. *Snapshot now from Chad Danforth*.*

Quickly combing her fingers through her hair, checking her make-up, she slid her finger across the screen. Chad's selfie popped up.

"Want to see a movie?"

"What movie?" She responded.

Within seconds his reply notification lit up her screen, like it had every day for the past week. By now, she knew what was coming.

"One that we don't really have to focus on ;)"

A month and two heated make-out sessions later, Vanessa finds herself in a same routine: her phone going off every once and a while with a flirtatious message from Chad. Although these messages promise nothing more than a few moments of companionship, that is exactly where she wants their status to remain.

"Hopefully we will just continue to hook-up," Vanessa said. "I want that. It's nice being able to have that outlet without having it be a committed relationship. For the most part, my friends do the same thing. I mean I have one friend in a committed relationship, but that is the exception to the rule."

Vanessa has joined the trending "hook-up culture"—her generation now labeled in popular lore by its uncommitted encounters that range from sessions filled with kisses and nothing much more for her peers, to rendezvous for consensual sex typical among 20-somethings. Adopters of hook-up culture share a common objective—the desire to physically experience the trappings of love without the pressures of more traditional romantic relationships.

According to research published in *The Encyclopedia of Human Relationships (2009)* by psychologist Harry Reis of the University of Rochester, among teens who are sexually active, 60 percent reported engaging in sex with someone they are not dating.

Hook-ups and premarital sex among teens are nothing new, but today high school students approach both love and sex with more casual attitudes. According to Eagle Edition's Jan. 29 survey of 132 students, 62 percent would consider hooking-up, as long as it was for nothing more than kissing, with someone outside an established relationship.

Although hook-up culture is evolving, it does not represent the majority. The poll also revealed 73 percent have little to no sexual experience. Instead, some desire more traditional dating arrangements, even if facilitated by a smart phone.

Cullen Corr [16] asked his current girlfriend out over text a little over four months ago. For their first date, they dined at Princi Italia and then watched a spy movie. Corr prefers this classic courtship.

"It means more if you date someone than if you just hook-up with someone random," Corr said. "When you date someone, you become best friends with that person. It means more because you get to share stuff together, and you get to know them more."

Studies show, however, as teens mature into college-age adults, their preferences may change. The media's impact on behavior is palpable.

A 2015 report by Common Sense Media calculated young people ages eight to 18 spend an average of nine hours a day plugged in for entertainment including watching TV, videos and movies, playing video games, listening to music and checking social media. This rivals a full-time job. Considering

the often risqué content of popular TV shows like HBO's "Game of Thrones" or ABC's Shonda Rimes' line up—shows leading ratings among young adults 18-35—the potential power to affect attitudes about behavior is tremendous. Among those students surveyed, 60 percent admit the casual sex depicted on these popular TV dramas plays a large role in shaping attitudes about uncommitted sex. But there is one significant difference. These glamorous and cavalier TV characters are all adults.

The media—movies, songs, TV shows—hammers a common theme: hook-ups and uncommitted sexual activity can be both physically and emotionally fulfilling without the "strings" complicating traditional pairings.

"The way the media portray relationships is dramatically different now than they did even 10 years ago, in terms of hooking-up as sort of being more of the norm," Licensed Professional Counselor and Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist Priya Singhvi said. "I mean, just look at all of the rom-coms that have been released recently. Even just like "Friends with Benefits" have really been telling a story about a hook-up kind of relationship more so than a long-term, lasting committed relationship."

But, customary relationships still play a vital role in teen decisions to initially become sexually active.

Monique Evans* first romance was her boyfriend of one and a half years. When they broke up and Monique got older, her attitude about the importance of commitment changed.

"I think a lot of guys look at sex like it's no big deal, and as weird as that is, I think I have the same mentality," Monique said.

She likens her detached attitude to the female characters she sees on the screen.

"I'm watching 'Grey's Anatomy,' and the main character jokes how she has sex all the time, and nobody think she's a slut," Monique said. "She's a grown woman, she makes her own decisions. I think that the amount of sex we see in movies and TV shows leads people to think sex isn't that big of a thing."

When hook-up culture heads to college, it becomes more common and more sexual. In a study conducted by Online College Social Life Survey published in 2011, only 30 percent had never hooked-up in college. But among those who had, 20 percent of women and 25 percent of men had hooked-up with 10 or more by senior year for the sole purpose of having sex.

Not only is modern entertainment content portraying young people with nonchalant attitudes about sex, but apps like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, Tinder, Grindr and Blendr play key facilitators.

In 2015, Zeke Blue* joined Tinder as a place to search for hook-ups. A swipe to the right and he's found someone for a brief and impersonal encounter, but he would never consider dating someone he spots among those photos.

"I would never try to seek a relationship on Tinder," Zeke said. "That's really not what it's for in my opinion. The nature of the app is very casual. You are not looking for something deeper than the appearance of someone on their profile picture. You rank each other. It's kind of like hot or not. It's very high school."

So "high-school" is also the social stigma that may come along with participating in hook-up culture. A paltry 5 percent of students surveyed consider someone who has casual sex outside a relationship

"datable."

But, modern times compound the media's influence with the time crunch teens suffer juggling homework, sports, social activities, volunteering and other obligations. Yet, they still desire companionship in one form or another.

"The intensity of most people's daily lives has really increased dramatically," Singhvi said. "So now you have less time to actually invest in relationships. With teens, you've got a normal school day, plus sports, plus an extra-curricular activity and community service, and all of these other things that you feel like you must be doing in order to keep up with the Joneses."

For competitive high schoolers laser-focused on college, relationships may be considered wasted energy in light of all the demands and expectations others place on them.

"I honestly am an extremely busy person," Vanessa said. "A relationship comes with all of these emotional complications, and when you are in a relationship, you have to deal with all of the ups and downs. Especially when you finally get to the end of senior year and know you are going leave and probably not talk to most of these people ever again. Why would you get emotionally invested?"

Although physical encounters sans commitment might be regarded as commonplace by teenagers and young adults, participating in these acts may be dangerous for a number of reasons.

The Dallas Police Department reported Tuesday that it has seen a spike in sexual assaults resulting after victims agreed to hook-ups through social media apps.

In a televised press conference, Dallas Police Lt. Israel Herrera urged women to report incidents so DPD can track them, noting as online options increase, so do risks.

"These criminals are exploiting the willingness to meet up by lying about who they are, their identity and their appearance and intentions," he said.

Physical harm and negative social repercussions are immediately evident. But as people mature, therapists wonder if hook-ups contribute to psychological and physiological issues resulting from engaging in behavior they consider counter to human nature.

"Biologically, we are wired to connect and have long-term committed relationships," Singhvi said. "If you go back to what really drives all of our behavior, it has to do with biology, and the biology of sex is really to be able to procreate. We are internally wired to be in a committed, long-term relationships to go out and raise a family."

Singhvi explained both men and women release large amounts of the hormone oxytocin during sexual activity. Oxytocin is known as the "trust hormone" because it encourages people to bond with each other. It is the same hormone women release during childbirth that builds an immediate connection with a child. So biologically, both men and women are instinctively driven to search for commitment.

With hook-ups so ordinary, students involved in committed relationships feel abnormal.

"You're seen as different, or you're seen as having too high of standards, or being too high maintenance if you aren't OK with the hook-up society, so everybody just has to deal with it," Vanessa said.

Recreational affection can lead to emotional and

psychological bouts with depression. Denying the body's biological requirements for commitment can hinder future long-term relationships.

"If all you've learned, or all you know, is sort of this hook up culture and then distance— you are being really intimate and then you are distanced from someone—it absolutely would make it more difficult to invest in a long term partner because you haven't practiced it."

Along with interfering with relationships, these emotionally vacant interactions in the respect or admiration typical of a committed relationship can leave teens feeling pressured and uncomfortable.

"Every once in a while, I'll start dating a guy, and in the middle of it, I realize I don't want to keep going, I'll want to stop," Monique said. "It's something I want to be over. I want to be alone."

Hook-up culture may condition teens to view committed relationships to accommodate their own needs for sex and pressure partners to accommodate theirs.

Just a few weeks away from turning 18, senior Cynthia Rulin* decided to break up with her boyfriend.

"I realized that [not only] did I not want to do it for religious reasons, but because I felt like I wasn't ready."

As early as when Cynthia was in high school, she resolved to set her own boundaries. Soon learned they differed from some of her peers.

"I feel like some girls don't want to do it because they feel like they think it's not their thing," Cynthia said. "When you see older kids doing it and they feel like they're doing it, that's how so many kids here do it. They just give in to the pressure."

Cynthia's friends' experiences are similar. "A lot of my friends' stories are about hook-ups," Cynthia said. "Most of their experiences are negative. I've learned from other people and it makes me not want to do it."

Along with sharing their cautionary tales, Cynthia's friends have been supportive. "I've never been judged about my choices, considering that almost all my friends are like that's very weird," Cynthia said. "High school shows, the outcast is always the one who's not even brought up."

*Names have been changed



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—Priya Singhvi
LPC, LMFT

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Hook-ups



defined **on this campus** as a session of **just kissing**, whereas, among **adults** it can **progress** to consensual sex. Both are **without** expectations of **romantic relationships**.

Data from 132 student responses, Jan. 29

62 percent are open to **hooking-up** with someone **outside** an **established relationship**

73 percent think hook-ups are so appealing to some people because companionship **without any strings** attached is **fun**

Only **29%** are open to using a dating app like Tinder to hook-up

56 percent think **hook-ups** **appeal** to some people to **boost confidence**, for points in a **competition**, **for bragging rights**

72 percent **HAVE NOT** had sex

60 percent admit the casual sex depicted on **TV shows** play a large role in **influencing** young people's opinion on **uncommitted sex**

Nine hours a day

on average spent by children **ages eight to 18** on some form of **media**
Common Sense Media, 2015

3 in 10 college seniors have never hooked-up

Online College Social Life Survey, 2011

Among sexually active teens, **60 percent** have reported engaging in **sex** with someone they are **not dating**.

The Encyclopedia of Human Relationships, 2009