

# Can #MeToo Feminism and the Hookup Culture Coexist?

There is a scene in the 2017 hit romantic comedy *The Big Sick* that shows the perfect one-night stand.

The protagonist, a 30-something Pakistani immigrant named Kumail (played by Kumail Nanjiani of HBO's *Silicon Valley*), meets an attractive grad student (Zoe Kazan) at a Chicago comedy club where he moonlights as a comedian. They have drinks and laughs and end up having sex on a mattress in his bedroom. After their mutual enjoyment is complete, she refuses a ride home and calls an Uber instead. Kumail's phone goes off. (He's her Uber driver.) They begin dating and fall in love.

*The Big Sick* is funny and entertaining, a romantic comedy designed to appeal to millennials who came of age during the [hookup culture](#), which accepted and encouraged casual sex and one-night stands. But "romantic" is a key word here.

As liberating an idea as no-strings-attached sex might be, there are casualties—emotional and physical—in a culture that encourages individuals to use others for their own pleasure. (Ideally both parties enjoy themselves in this consensual hookup, but we'll see this often is not the case.)

For years there was a general belief that the hookup culture empowered women by liberating them from the shackles of sexual purity.

This probably is a fiction. Evidence suggests that the primary beneficiaries of a hookup culture are men, particularly alphas—those who have the most wealth, power, and sexual appeal, and as a consequence [get the most sex](#).

A generation of women appear to be figuring this out, and they

are not happy.

“[W]omen are angry, temporarily powerful—and very, very dangerous,” writes Caitlin Flanagan in *The Atlantic*, [in response](#) to recent allegations of sexual misconduct against actor Aziz Ansari.

### Hook-Up Gone Wrong

Ansari is not the guy you expect to see accused of sexual misconduct. On the hit Netflix show *Master of None*, a show he created, Ansari’s character is sensitive, funny, and sweet. The show mocks hyper-masculinity and even featured a storyline about a likable character (Chef Jeff) who gets accused of sexual harassment by several women.

The allegations against Ansari stem from a Jan. 13 article in a publication called *Babe*. In the article, an unnamed woman from Brooklyn, under the pseudonym Grace, accuses Ansari of pressuring her into oral sex.

The two had met at an Emmy Awards after-party in September. Grace said she approached Ansari because they had the same

camera. Flirting ensued. She gave him her number right before she left.

After a week of flirtatious texting, they went on a date. It didn't go as planned.

Grace arrived at Ansari's Manhattan apartment on the evening of Sept. 25. It was a Monday. They drank wine. "It was white," she told *Babe*. "I didn't get to choose and I prefer red, but it was white wine."

After drinks they went out for lobster on a nearby boat. She did most of the talking, she says. Ansari seemed intent on getting back. When they did, he made a move. They began to kiss and soon their clothes were off. Ansari went for protection (a staple in the hookup culture). This happened next:

*When Ansari told her he was going to grab a condom within minutes of their first kiss, Grace voiced her hesitation explicitly. "I said something like, 'Whoa, let's relax for a sec, let's chill.'" She says he then resumed kissing her, briefly performed oral sex on her, and asked her to do the same thing to him. She did, but not for long. "It was really quick. Everything was pretty much touched and done within ten minutes of hooking up, except for actual sex."*

There are at least 2,000 more words to Grace's account of her date with Ansari. But one thing is clear: Ansari and Grace experienced the encounter in very different ways. One suspects this is perhaps because they had very different expectations.

## **Hardwired for Sex**

I don't know Ansari and cannot claim to know with any degree of certainty what his intentions were that night. But I suspect he took Grace out with the goal of having sex with her. That is what the hookup culture is about, and why men are

generally comfortable with it.

The idea that men are hardwired for sex in a way that women are not is not universally accepted, but it's pretty close. For decades, evolutionary scientists have pointed out that it's simply a matter of "genetic logic."

"Going back thousands of generations, those males who were easily and frequently aroused would have more kids than those who weren't," the psychologist Richard Hagen noted in an interview two generations ago. "Evolutionary theory, then, insists men should have been selected for arousal and orgasm."

Women, Hagen goes on to explain, are not selected in this way.

Hagen's conclusion may or may not have been reinforced by the fact he was a 44-year-old professor [dating](#) a 21-year-old grad student at the time. Regardless, the idea that men generally are not programmed for monogamy was shared by thinkers as diverse as Einstein, Tolkien, and Kinsey.

Ansari, a man of fame and wealth, may have been looking for a meaningful relationship with an interesting and engaging young woman from a different social and economic class. More likely, in my opinion, he was looking to "hook up."

That men appear to be programmed for multiple sexual partners does not mean they do not have a choice in how they behave, of course. It simply means they are more likely to find satisfaction in a culture which embraces no-strings-attached, guilt-free sex.

There is evidence that women, for various reasons, might not benefit from such an arrangement.

While some feminists, [such as](#) Hanna Rosin, have argued that the hookup culture is "an engine of female progress," evidence suggests women are less likely to find satisfaction in it—literally. Surveys show that sex is (way) [less enjoyable](#)

for women outside of intimate relationships.

Perhaps more importantly, women appear to be “evolutionarily programmed” to experience a wide range of negative emotions following one-night stands.

“Women regret that they agree to a one-night stand more often than men. Men regret passing up the chance more than women,” Professor Leif Edward Ottesen Kennair of the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) recently [told](#) the *Telegraph*.

### What is #MeToo?

Grace’s encounter with Ansari took place about six weeks after Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein was accused by numerous women of sexual assault and harassment.

Almost from the beginning of #MeToo, there was a small chorus suggesting that the movement [lumped a lot of different behaviors](#) together. In recent weeks, as more public personalities were accused of various kinds of sexual misconduct, the chorus became louder. Last week it reached a crescendo.

Andrew Sullivan, [writing in](#) *New York* magazine, said the movement’s morphed into neo-McCarthyism. Margaret Atwood, author of the feminist novel *The Handmaid’s Tale*, [compared](#) #MeToo to a witch hunt.

*Time’s Up For [#MeToo](#) McCarthyism*<https://t.co/d2TjMUKfn2> via [@intelligencer](#)

– Andrew Sullivan (@sullydish) [January 12, 2018](#)

But are they right?

People will react to Grace's description in different ways depending on life experience and sexual mores. From a reader's perspective, it is clear she felt uncomfortable, disgusted, and conflicted by what was happening. And she expected Ansari to know how she was feeling.

"You ignored clear non-verbal cues," Grace texted Ansari the following day.

What Grace may not realize is that, according to her own account, Ansari was receiving many other non-verbal cues. She let herself be undressed. She performed oral sex on him and received oral sex in return.

For Ansari, these non-verbal cues were likely stronger signs that Grace was participating in the hookup than the moments when she, according to her account, pulled back, mumbled, or paused. "I know that my hand stopped moving at some points," she told *Babe*.

Grace felt traumatized by the experience. But is Ansari to blame?

Flanagan, writing at *The Atlantic*, says no.

"Apparently there is a whole country full of young women who don't know how to call a cab," she writes. "They're angry and temporarily powerful and last night they destroyed a man who didn't deserve it."

Jessica Valenti, a feminist author and columnist at the *Guardian*, disagrees.

*A lot of men will read that post about Aziz Ansari and see an everyday, reasonable sexual interaction. But part of what women are saying right now is that what the culture considers*

*“normal” sexual encounters are not working for us, and oftentimes harmful.*

– Jessica Valenti (@JessicaValenti) [January 14, 2018](#)

In a way, both Flanagan and Valenti are right.

As *New York Times* writer Bari Weiss [writes](#), Ansari is clearly guilty – of not being a mind-reader.

“There is a useful term for what Grace experienced on her night with Mr. Ansari,” Weiss writes. “It’s called ‘bad sex.’ It sucks.”

But Valenti’s point that such “sexual encounters are not working for us, and oftentimes [are] harmful” is probably valid. And the campus Title IX script, which [discarded due process](#) for those accused of sexual misconduct, is now being applied publicly against celebrities.

Under the old rules of the hookup culture, Grace gets to spend a night with a famous person who possesses wealth and a charming sense of humor. He buys her dinner, provides the drinks, and listens to her. Then they hook up, and hopefully she enjoys it. But either way, afterwards, she goes away (quietly).

Many women will be fully satisfied with such an encounter. Others, like Grace, will feel like a piece of meat that has been chewed and spat away.

“You guys are all the same, you guys are all the fucking same,” Grace recalls telling Ansari after sex.

For years, women who participated in the hookup culture and felt conflicted, uncomfortable, and disgusted by what it entailed had no recourse. Now they do.

As Flanagan put it in *The Atlantic*, Grace's story is "3,000 words of revenge porn."

Having the ability to destroy someone who has cast you away when he was finished with you is potent power. And while people often say that power corrupts, the writer William Gaddis saw it differently.

"Power doesn't corrupt people," he wrote. "People corrupt power."

This is why #MeToo and the hookup culture probably cannot coexist.