

Are Sex-Negative 'Puriteens' Actually Taking Over the Internet?

Millennials are claiming that zoomers are more sexually conservative than previous generations — but is there any truth to that, or are we just all too online?

By **EJ DICKSON**



There's a tendency among the geriatric users of the internet (namely, people 25 and older) to develop a bizarre fixation on the sexual habits of younger people. Often, this manifests in a slow-moving, primordial sludge of concern-trolling trend pieces that gripe about zoomers either having too much casual sex, or not having enough; usually, there's a healthy dose of Ludditism thrown in for good measure, with the culprit cited as porn or hookup apps or lipsynching platforms. And while there's always been something a bit creepy about adults opining on the sexual habits of teens, the fact that much of this finger-wagging is coming from **millennials** — who, as the most educated and poorly compensated generation in history, already have enough to worry about without concerning themselves with whether 17-year-olds are banging — adds an extra layer of complexity to the discourse.

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This is, essentially, what is going on with the conversation surrounding “puriteens,” a phrase used to describe a theoretical type of extremely online youth that is incensed by any display of sexuality on the internet. It's unclear where exactly the term originated, but its first use on **Twitter** appears to be — pay close attention here — a reply to a March viral tweet that is a screengrab of a DM. In the DM, an anonymous 15-year-old **chides** the recipient for “liking some really questionable stuff,” including “h*rny Hannibal tweets” due to their issues with the fandom surrounding the show *Hannibal*. “Kids on this bird app are getting really bold,” the original poster says in the tweet. “Just saw someone use the term ‘puriteens,’ and wow is that an apt description,” says one user in response.

The original tweet was intended to demonstrate an extremely specific type of behavior from an extremely specific demographic: namely, young people online who are well-versed in the language of identity and sexual politics, and are prone to calling out anyone they see falling short of their standards. Without a doubt, this is a thing that happens quite a bit on the internet. But it's usually spearheaded by a small and very vocal minority and doesn't really have a lot of impact beyond the Twittersphere, making it unclear whether this opinion is pervasive among **Gen Z** as a whole.

So are zoomers really more sexually conservative than previous generations? “I think you’re seeing a very loud minority compared to what’s really out there,” says **TikTok** creator Alastair, 19. Rebecca Jennings, a senior writer for Vox who has previously written about Gen Z’s role in the online **anti-porn movement**, agrees that this may not be representative of an entire generation. “What we’re actually talking about when we talk about ‘the teens today’ is only the most extreme views, the ones that rise to the top of TikTok/Twitter/Tumblr/Reddit that get the most engagement,” she says. “Painting them all with one sweeping brush isn’t helpful because the vast majority likely have much more nuanced beliefs.”

That became especially clear earlier this month with the ongoing debate over **kink** at Pride, an exhausting and well-worn discussion that has dominated some corners of the internet. Those who take the anti-kink at Pride side argue that kinksters should not be allowed because minors, as well as adults who are uncomfortable with such public displays of sexuality, can’t provide their consent to things like seeing a guy on a leash licking an Earl Grey-flavored cone outside of an artisanal ice cream shop. Those in the other camp argue that kink is deeply rooted in the history of **LGBTQ** liberation and Pride itself, that there is nothing inherently sexualized or disturbing about a man in BDSM gear and the onus should be on parents to explain such things to children or steer them toward more overtly family-friendly Pride events; and also, who the fuck cares.

This discourse is not entirely organic: much of it is pushed by far-right bad actors attempting to **promote homophobic talking points**. It's also not new, like, at all. "There's always been discussion of how family-friendly the Pride parade [should be], or when I was a little baby gay, whether drag queens should be on floats, and if we were 'flaunting' our sexuality," millennial author and activist **Leo Herrera** told me. "It tends to come from the more corporate conservative side who is really concerned we are presenting stereotypes or that we won't be accepted or it'll cost us funding or press. It's the same conversation repackaged."

What is somewhat new, however, is a claim shared by many on social media that the anti-kink at Pride stance is increasingly being touted by younger people, reflecting an emerging generational divide in the LGBTQ community. "Sorry to all the puriteens who will never know the unfettered joy of taking your top off inside the Stonewall Inn," said one prominent activist on Twitter. "I hope you never know the pain of being beaten by a cop for standing up for queer rights." Another tweeted: "Dear puriteens: We older queerfolk are putting side-eye on your nonsense for a reason. We lived through far worse from people with rhetoric virtually identical to yours. We push back on behalf of the folk who didn't make it, so history does not repeat."

There are two noteworthy things about this discourse: The first is that, like many social media narratives that are forged in opposition to a perspective or an idea, its totally unclear what these posts are in response to. The discussion is overwhelmingly dominated by older people arguing against Puriteens arguing against kink at pride, without citing any specific or prominent examples (also worth noting: though there are plenty of examples of millennials on Twitter using the phrase "Purateen" to pejoratively refer to zoomers, it's not exactly common among zoomers themselves, with many teens I spoke to never having heard of it before).

"I have seen a lot of anti 'no kink at pride' discourse, but I have seen very little of people pushing this idea, and what I have seen was from people who were not particularly young," says author and queer historian **Hugh Ryan**. That's not to say it's nonexistent — it was not difficult for me to find examples of young people arguing against kink at Pride on Twitter and TikTok, though due to their age I'm not going to post any here — but it is to indicate that we're talking about a point of view that is, if not nonexistent, fairly marginal.

Perhaps most importantly, there isn't any actual data suggesting that young people are any more puritanical or sex-negative than their forebears. One study that has gotten a great deal of attention suggests that zoomers are having less casual sex than their predecessors, and 2017 YouGov data compiled by *Rolling Stone* seems to support this, indicating that only one percent of 18- to 24-year-olds said they would feel comfortable having sex on the first date, as opposed to 27 percent of 35-to-44-year-olds. But even if some limited data suggests that zoomers may be having slightly less casual sex, that's not necessarily a bad thing, as anyone who has ever spent time battling a slew of unsolicited dick pics and tequila-fueled, orgasm-free one-night stands knows all too well. Moreover, zoomers are far more likely to self-identify as LGBTQ or sexually fluid, indicating that they're more open and comfortable with exploring their sexual identities.

If there is something to be said for the emergence of "puriteen" views, however, it likely stems from the fact that, as a result of spending their entire lives negotiating the murky spaces of the internet, zoomers have been instilled with perhaps a stronger understanding of consent and the dangers of sexual exploitation more than any other generation, and are thus more highly attuned to sexualized language and themes infiltrating spaces where it might not be appropriate. "When you're a minor on the internet and you're faced with a problem like grooming, there's an increased militancy and protection kids want to have for themselves and others," Alastair explains. "And as a result it's probably sprouted some ideas that can be perceived as sex-negative, even if they don't view them as such....in order to create language that's more accepting and curate spaces that are safe for us, you still end up being exclusionary even if they don't mean to or realize it."

For young queer teens in particular, the fact that they may have spent the last year and a half navigating online-only queer spaces due to the pandemic leads to a lack of or partial understanding of what those spaces may look like IRL — hence, the pearl-clutching over the potential presence of leathermen at Pride among young people who may have never attended a Pride to begin with. "A lot of the vocalization for kink not being at pride is that it's gonna make kids uncomfortable. I understand to an extent," says Atlas Fox, a TikTokker in his late teens who came out against the anti-kink at pride discourse. "But no one is doing full BDSM scenes at Pride parade! And that's what these kids have in mind." He attributes whatever puritanical discourse there may be around Pride among young people to a lack of education. "A lot of our younger generation of LGBTQ members aren't versed in our history," he says. "They know what it means to have their sexuality but they don't know how hard it had to be fought for for us to get there."

For these reasons, dismissing young people who may have a knee-jerk negative reaction to unconventional displays of sexuality as “puriteens” is probably not doing anyone any favors. “These people are still children, and they’re still learning what Pride is,” says Alastair. “Antagonizing them isn’t helping.” As for the assertion that zoomers in general are skewing sex-negative, as Ryan puts it: “I watch the CW and it’s basically softcore porn. Something there is not computing.”

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