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QUEERING BY EXAMPLE:
SEX EDUCATION IN THE AGE OF VLOGGING

by

Zoë Simpson

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

Queering by Example: Sex Education in the Age of Vlogging

by

Zoë Simpson

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The 1990s saw the rise of third wave feminism, queer theory and the digital age. This paper looks at how the three come together in YouTube video bloggers' promotion of queer sex-positive ideology. Sex positivism is the belief that all safe, consensual sex is healthy, while queer theory emphasizes the diversity and instability of sex and gender identities. YouTube vloggers engaged in life-streaming profit from the entertainment value of revealing personal sexual information while framing their sexual revelations as healthy, shame-free sex positivism. In doing so, they also put their unique and sometimes changing sexualities on public display, in effect providing viewers with in-depth portraits of queer sexuality. Analyzing a select collection of feminist and queer vloggers who share their sexual information online, I argue that YouTube vlogging functions as a valuable and effective platform for sexual health education.

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Queering by Example: Sex Education in the Age of Vlogging

On June 7, 2015, YouTube celebrity Shane Dawson posted a video titled “I’m Bisexual.” Unlike the standard “coming out” video that has become a YouTube cliché, Dawson’s video features two unusual aspects: a self-proclaimed lack of clarity about his sexual orientation and the combined announcement of his breakup with girlfriend Lisa Schwartz. A well-known vlogger – video blogger – since the early years of YouTube, Dawson’s two-year relationship with Schwartz was beloved among many of his over seven million subscribers. Often appearing in one another’s comedy sketches and vlogs, #Shisa (Shane and Lisa) became a relationship with tremendous fan investment. Dawson’s tearful admission of their breakup – along with Schwartz’s break-up explanation video later that week – sparked empathy among fans who shared their distress at the relationship’s end. Dawson explained that although he still loved Schwartz, he needed to explore his bisexuality, an aspect of himself that he had only recently come to accept after years of fear, shame, and repression. Despite the finality of his announcement that he was bisexual, he admitted a frustration with the in-between-ness of the identity, the unsettled place on the sliding scale between straight and gay, that had caused him confusion throughout his life and continued to leave him unsure. His public decision to break up in order to address and settle that confusion, and subsequent vlogs in which he publicly discusses his journey of sexual self-discovery, demonstrates YouTube vlogging’s ability to present sexuality in all of its messy, complicated ambiguity.

Shane Dawson is but one example of the numerous YouTube vloggers who provide sex education through the public sharing of their own personal lives. The World Health Organization (2016) defines sexual health as “a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Sexual health

requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence.” As I will show, positive, respectful approaches to sexuality focused on pleasure, safety, and emotional well-being abound in YouTube vloggers’ accounts of their own sexual experiences and their sexual advice to viewers.

As I sat down to write on vlogging’s efficacy as a sexual health education platform, I struggled to zero in on the primary merits on which to focus. As seen in Dawson’s coming out video, a large part of my fascination with sex education vlogging is the way in which it allows for the expression of complicated sexuality. A number of famous YouTubers have changed their publicly declared sexual orientation or gender identity over time, not only due to overcoming fear of prejudice, but in many cases due to a gradual process of self-discovery. Their self-contradictions, indecision and soul-searching are discussed with viewers in real time, sometimes spanning the course of years. In doing so, they provide viewers with an unstable, queer image of sexual identity.

This brings me to a second merit, which is YouTube vloggers’ presentation of sexual and gender diversity. For one, YouTube gives the opportunity for anyone with access to a camera and computer to create their own vlog channel, which has resulted in vlogger communities of sexual and gender minorities who struggle to find representation in mainstream media. These communities provide networks of support and peer education for members, allies and the curious. Secondly, by voicing their own unique experiences, these vloggers demonstrate diversity within any given label. Not every bisexual is bisexual the same way as Dawson, and his in-depth discussions of his experiences and desires over the course of many vlogs, in comparison with other openly bisexual vloggers’ self-descriptions, demonstrates this fact.

“Coming out” videos and other public discussions of the vlogger’s sexuality are also political statements, standing in defiance of stigma. This is not only an aspect of queer vloggers, but also sex-positive vloggers of any identity who believe that open, shameless discussion of sexuality is essential to sexual health. Female vloggers in particular treat public discussion of their sex lives as feminist acts in support of women’s sexual liberation, rejecting sexist double standards that have historically stigmatized female sexual expression.

Furthermore, vlogging has the potential to effectively promote sexual health through its use of entertainment. Vlog channels primarily consist of commentary about the vlogger’s life events, thoughts and feelings. They are often humorous, and may incorporate comedy sketches, guest appearances of fellow YouTube celebrities, or challenge/tag videos (viral games in which one YouTuber tags another to complete a challenge). While some YouTubers start out with vlog channels, others may begin as beauty gurus, sketch channels, etc., and start vlogging once they have established a fan base that is interested in following their personal life. Viewers are more likely to hear and retain information presented in an entertaining way, and they are more likely to share videos with their peers if those videos are entertaining. Additionally, successful vloggers become micro-celebrities, gaining fans who are invested in their lives, value their opinions, and look up to them as role models.

Finally, vlogs are primarily created by youth and for youth, outside the confines of formal education. While parents, teachers, and politicians work to decide what to tell kids about sex, children and young adults are finding and sharing information about sexuality on their own online. This is especially valuable to youth who find little support for their experiences of gender or sexuality in their geographic location, feel uncomfortable discussing these issues in person, or feel isolated in their sexual beliefs. Progressive, sex positive education focused on pleasure as well as

safety and the inclusion of queer sexualities remains controversial in formal education settings, but flourishes online. In short, by providing the opportunity for relatively democratic publication and viewership of entertaining, personal revelations, YouTube vlogging has become a powerful platform for queer, sex positive education.

Following contextualizing sections on the sex education debates and queer sex positive ideology, this paper analyzes select vlogger videos in two parts. The first examines the marriage between marketability and political/educational value in sexual vlogs. The videos in this section demonstrate how pushing the boundaries of oversharing by relating personal sexual information works to normalize sexual openness in the name of sexual health while simultaneously profiting from flirtation with the taboo. The second part argues that vlogging is uniquely suited to queer sexual education. I evidence this through analysis of one particular issue of sexual confusion – how trans vloggers and their partners label their sexual orientation.

I came to this project as a long time YouTube consumer. I began watching in 2005, the year it was founded, when I was thirteen years old. Like many young YouTube users, I have been both a viewer and creator, filming comedy sketches, parodies and celebrity tribute videos with my friends, producing vlogs and engaging with pop-culture fan communities through videos and comment sections. My perspective on vlogging's value for young viewers comes from my own experience growing up watching weekly YouTube vlog updates, invested in the lives of my favorite YouTube celebrities, listening to them discuss their relationships and sexcapades, and watching them change as we aged together. A few of the YouTubers I include in this paper are vloggers I have followed for years. My selection is biased towards my own tastes, as I chose to spend time analyzing YouTube channels that I genuinely enjoy. The incredible diversity of

YouTube—the second most popular website globally—would be near impossible to summarize here, and my sampling is by no means representative the vlogging community (Alexa 2016b).

Nonetheless, my daily engagement with YouTube for the past decade gives me a sense of where my selection sits within the general tone and culture of English-speaking vloggers. The majority of the top YouTube vloggers are in their teens or twenties and direct their videos towards younger audiences. Life advice is an extremely common theme in vlogs, and viewers report looking to vlogs mainly for entertainment, comedy and advice (GWI 2015). Coming out as part of a stigmatized group, whether in terms of mental illness or sexual or gender minority status, is a well-known trend and has been part of large-scale activist campaigns on YouTube. Public relationships, sexual topics such as “How did I lose my virginity?” videos and sex and romance advice are all common among the most popular vlog channels. The specific videos I chose are in tune with these general trends.

I started out with a few vloggers already in mind from my own viewing habits. From there, I found other channels by searching key phrases such as “sexual health” and “trans relationship” and following the rabbit hole of related videos recommended by YouTube or referenced by other vloggers. I selected channels based on a combination of their popularity and the extent to which they exemplified the mixture of entertainment, personal sharing and queer sex-positive advocacy that interests me. These channels range in popularity from just under four thousand subscribers to over seven million, with most having a few hundred thousand subscribers at least. In other words, I attempted to analyze videos with a substantial audience, showing that sexual health advocacy is taking place on channels with real influence. The most popular vloggers in my selection—Gigi Gorgeous, Shane Dawson, Joey Graceffa and Laci Green—are “mainstream” YouTube stars who regularly collaborate with fellow top YouTube celebrities and would be familiar to most avid vlog

followers. The less well-known vloggers in my selection still carry a substantial fan base but may be geared towards a more niche audience (e.g., Julie Vu who speaks exclusively on trans issues) or may be more inexperienced and amateur-level compared to the big hitters. These smaller scale vloggers with several thousand to a few hundred thousand subscribers are as much a part of the YouTube landscape as the top celebrities, considering that YouTube vlogging culture is in large part defined by the scope of its interactive vlogging community and its roots in amateur-driven content.

Ultimately, this paper makes the case for vlogging's *potential* as a source of sexual health education. While I have observed a trend towards queer sex positive sexual health advocacy among a number of YouTube vloggers, my observation is likely influenced by my tendency as a queer, sex positive user to seek out like-minded vloggers. My analysis does not provide clear information on how widespread advocacy of this sort has become, or the exposure of the typical vlog viewer to this type of content. Nor does this project attempt to show the extent to which vloggers actually impact their viewers' thoughts on sexuality. What my analysis does show is how vlogging enables a nuanced, in-depth portrait of unique and diverse sexualities and facilitates the normalization of sexual talk. However widespread the trend, it is clear that a number of vloggers with considerable viewership have used YouTube in precisely this way, framing their personal revelations as sexually healthy and tapping into sex as an entertaining topic. Further research would be needed to judge how popular this sexual health trend truly is on YouTube and other social media outlets, how much influence these revelations have on the beliefs, actions and well-being of their viewers, and how these merits could be applied elsewhere.

THE SEX EDUCATION DEBATES

In order to understand the role YouTube plays in complementing school and government provided education, it is important to understand the historical struggles of formal sex education. Federally funded sex education programs began in the early 1900s to combat rising rates of sexually transmitted infection, and included moral lessons against masturbation, prostitution and premarital sex (Planned Parenthood 2012). As social movements of the twentieth century challenged hegemonic sexual ideology, sex education programs became a battleground for sexual morality debates. Sex education remains a hot button issue today, focused mainly on the battle between abstinence-only versus comprehensive programs.

Emerging shifts in Americans' sexual outlook reached a watershed moment in the 1960s with the invention of accessible, effective contraception and the momentum of the feminist and civil rights movements. While sexual attitudes remain in many ways unsettled, premarital sex has become the norm in hegemonic American culture (Luker 2007). During the 1960s, incidence of premarital intercourse actually remained consistent with rates since the 1920s, but widespread change in acceptability compounded anxiety about unwed mothers exploiting welfare and the influence of increasingly explicit media on America's youth. Aided by these concerns and the growing presence of sex talk in the public sphere, sex education programs began gaining unprecedented public support (Irvine 2002:18-22). In 1964, in order to provide education more suited to the times, Planned Parenthood's medical director Mary Calderone founded the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS). Offering sex education that emphasized sexual pleasure, openness, and individual choice over guilt and shame, Calderone claimed, "We put sexuality into the field of health rather than the field of morals" (Irvine 2002:26). SIECUS quickly became and remains today a major force in support of comprehensive sex education.

Comprehensive programs teach that sex is normal, natural and healthy. They inform students how to use contraceptives to prevent pregnancy and how to prevent sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS, while also teaching that abstinence is the most effective preventative measure for both of these risks. Comprehensive education aims to allow individuals to define their own sexual morals and provides guidance on a range of social-emotional topics such as relationships and interpersonal skills to help students negotiate their feelings and needs. These programs also provide factual information on abortion, masturbation and sexual orientation, as well as human sexual development and reproduction. By comparison, abstinence-only education teaches that sex outside of heterosexual marriage will cause social, psychological and physical damage. These programs only provide contraceptive information in regards to their rates of failure or potential harm, and controversial topics such as abortion, masturbation, and homosexuality are either omitted or condemned (Planned Parenthood 2012).

From the very beginning, SIECUS was met with outrage from conservatives who considered the organization anti-Christian. Calderone argued that sexual decision-making must be left to the individual and refused to pronounce edicts on what sexual expressions one should or should not engage in beyond empirically supported information regarding its effect on physical well-being. Appealing to the authority of scientific objectivity, her philosophy was as follows: “The fact is there, what you do about it is your business. So I’m talking from strength, I don’t have opinions. The only opinion I have is that people should find out the truth, the real truth, not what it says in the Bible, because they didn’t have ultrasound in those days” (quoted in Irvine 2002:29). Although Calderone was herself religious, to conservative Christians her insistence on scientifically guided and individually developed value systems rejected the moral authority of the

divine word. According to Cal Thomas of the Moral Majority, SIECUS was “a beehive of so-called secular humanists who deny God” (quoted in Irvine 2002:28).

SIECUS and other comprehensive sex education programs were not the only targets of this accusation. To conservative Christians, it appeared as though the nation was falling further and further from grace. Feminist and civil rights gains over the sixties and seventies such as the Civil Rights Act, Title IX, and *Roe v. Wade* undermined biblical gender roles and the traditional family. In 1963, the Supreme Court outlawed school-led prayer in public schools. Around the same time, school curriculums began to include theory of knowledge elements that encouraged the questioning of established truths and values, and private Christian schools became subject to government certification restrictions that undermined the autonomy of its religious educators. In short, schools seemed to support a departure from God (Ammerman 1994:40-43).

In response to this apparent secularization, disparate conservative Christian elements came together to form single-issue oppositional groups crusading against pornography, rock ‘n’ roll, and the like (Irvine 2002:41). The single-issue groups of the sixties formed the grounds for the Christian Right, and by the 1980s, conservative Christians had developed into a powerful political force. Among the range of cultural anxieties, family and reproductive issues were the most emotionally fraught. As such, sex education served as a particularly poignant symbol of moral decline and a fruitful point for political mobilization (Irvine 2002:42-43).

Meanwhile, rising rates of teen pregnancy and HIV/AIDS during the seventies and eighties strengthened demand for federally funded sex education from religious and nonreligious Americans alike. The vocal abstinence-only movement succeeded in controlling what type of education that would be. Starting in 1981 during the Reagan Administration, the government began rapidly expanding federally funded sex education programs – all of which were abstinence-only.

Federal funding for abstinence-only increased exponentially from 1996 to 2009, especially during the George W. Bush administration. Since 1996, \$1.5 billion dollars have gone to abstinence-only education and funding continues to this day. Federally funded comprehensive sex education did not exist until 2010, at which point the Obama administration and Congress eliminated two-thirds of abstinence-only support and began providing funding for comprehensive programs (SIECUS n.d.).

According to Irvine, the sex education controversies of the sixties “demonstrated a useful and critical strategy: that constituencies could be mobilized by strategic discourse which fostered the stigmatization of various social groups and sexual activities” (2002:43). Uniting under the cause of “traditional values,” the Christian Right developed through highly dedicated, active and well-connected groups such as the Religious Roundtable, the Christian Voice and the Moral Majority. These groups rallied activists against anti-Christian threats such as sexual depravity—from homosexuality to the exposure of young children to sex (Irvine 2002:60-65). By the early 2000s, over two dozen national organizations existed to oppose comprehensive sex education, whereas SIECUS remained the only single-issue national organization in support of comprehensive programs (Irvine 2002:70-71).

Why is it that abstinence-only has maintained such strong support? One theory is that the social and political upheaval of the mid-twentieth century created uncomfortable uncertainty, prompting many to turn to the order and stability of Christian fundamentalism and its commitment to the written word (Ammerman 1994:39-40; Berger 1996). The sexual revolution left in its wake a culture of sexual moral confusion. The rule that one must wait until marriage collapsed, and no clear hegemonic sexual ideology has risen in its place (Luker 2007; Bogle 2008; Schalet 2011; Irvine 2002; Irvine 1990). Social rules of acceptable sexual behavior concerning number of sexual

partners, type of sexual partners, relationship length or frequency remain hazy and disputed, which for many is an uncomfortable or even frightening space to occupy. The dedication to conservative sexual ideologies could in part be a matter of not having a clear, stable alternative sexual doctrine.

While this helps explain activist fervor among the Christian Right and the government's strong support for abstinence-only education, it does not reflect public opinion. At the time of the 1996 increase in federal abstinence-only funding—more than ten years before the establishment of federally funded comprehensive education—over eighty percent of Americans supported comprehensive programs, and approval has only increased in the years since (Advocates for Youth 2009; SIECUS 2010). Support also cuts across party lines (Advocates for Youth 2009). This widespread approval supports Irvine's analysis that abstinence-only advocacy has been the project of a vocal and politically useful minority in the midst of a more progressive majority.

Regardless of which program is more effective, both comprehensive and abstinence-only programs primarily emphasize the potential risks of sex. Growing evidence suggests that safe sex education that places pleasure first—such as teaching techniques for more fulfilling sex or including images of desire—is more effective in promoting safe practices than fear-driven lessons on risk prevention, which frequently send the inadvertent message that safe sex and desirable sex are incompatible (Philpott, Knerr and Boydell 2006). Similarly, in her comparative study of Dutch and American families, sociologist Amy Schalet (2011) concludes that Dutch teens' far lower rates of unplanned pregnancy and STIs relative to American teenagers are due to Dutch parents' and Dutch sex education programs' emphasis on openness, pleasure and autonomy.

In *Not Under My Roof: Parents, Teens and the Culture of Sex* (2011), Schalet seeks to understand why most American parents say they would not allow their teenager's boyfriend or girlfriend to sleep over, while most Dutch parents say that they would. Throughout her American interviews, Schalet found “the notion of teenage sexuality as an individual, overpowering force

that is difficult for teenagers to control” (Ch. 3). Both boys and girls in the US, she argues, are taught to see sex as a danger. American parents view it as their responsibility to protect their children from hormonal impulses until the children become autonomous adults who can regulate themselves. In the Netherlands, “Youth are expected to possess an internal barometer with which they can pace their sexual progression...and discern the point at which they are ready to move toward sexual intercourse” (Conclusion). Parents see it as their responsibility to “adjust themselves to their children’s pace of development...lest they lose touch with the reality of their children’s lives” (Ch. 2). According to Schalet, the American belief that teenagers are incapable of managing the risks of sex becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The Dutch process of normalization allows for more open communication between teenagers and adults, opening the door for support and education that “gives teenagers opportunities to learn the interactional skills with which they can better recognize and articulate sexual wishes and boundaries, and negotiate contraception and condoms...without fear of causing disappointment or being shamed” (Conclusion). Because even the most sexually liberal Americans tend to be less comfortable with their child’s sexuality than their Dutch counterparts and more anxious about the risks, American teenagers are much more likely than Dutch teens to have “ambivalent and negative feelings” about their early sexual experiences (Ch. 1).

Schalet’s study demonstrates the sexually conservative culture that sex confessors on YouTube are working to change. Even the relatively liberal comprehensive education supporters in the US would likely be uneasy with the degree of openness with which Dutch education programs discuss sexual intimacy in public schools. For instance, one Dutch textbook explains to students, “making love takes patience. Your whole body is full of places that want to be caressed, rubbed, licked, and bitten softly” (Ch.1). Such content would be downright scandalous in an American public school’s sex education program.

While school boards must answer to concerned parents, online sex educators are able to independently take their messages directly to adolescents. The anti-shame, pro-normalization messages of YouTube vloggers who openly discuss their sexuality help provide viewers with the confidence and vocabulary they need to communicate their needs, wants and questions so that they may have safer, more fulfilling sex. In addition, research suggests that adolescents are more likely to share sexual messages with their peers through social media if the information is presented humorously. Byron, Albury and Evers (2013) claim that the main factors preventing adolescents from sharing sexual health information online is fear of bullying or gossip related to the stigma of sexual health concerns, especially in relation to STIs. They found that comedic messages are a significant way to mitigate stigma and encourage the sharing of sexual health education media. In this way, the entertainment value of confessions—both through humor and celebrity draw—might be an effective vehicle for reaching youth.

QUEER SEX POSITIVISM

SIECUS's health-focused ideology and emphasis on pleasure, openness, and individual choice reflects the ideals of the growing sex positive movement. Sex positivism views sex as a natural and fulfilling aspect of human life and supports experimentation and transgression in the pursuit of pleasure. According to sex positivist ideology, all safe, consensual sex is acceptable (Comella and Queen 2008).

Early shifts towards sex-positivism began in the sex radical and free-love movements of the nineteenth century, which argued against government and church interference in personal relationships. They tended to focus especially on women's right to pursue sexual pleasure and promoted the separation of women's sexuality from economic dependence through means such as the abolition of marriage and the provision of contraception. Some free-love activists, such as

anarcha-feminist Emma Goldman, even spoke in defense of homosexuality and condemned legal and social restraints on the diversity of sexual desires (Parker 2003).

Around the same time, European social scientists began to take interest in the scientific study of sex. During the nineteenth century, writers such as Sigmund Freud began publishing major works on sexuality, and the first researcher to formally argue for the establishment of a specific sexual science was German physician Iwan Bloch in 1907. Sexology eventually took foot in the United States in the mid-twentieth century, through the work of Alfred Kinsey (Irvine 5; Mayo 2014). According to Irvine, Kinsey's interest in human sexuality and the American public's interest in his findings were largely due to the widespread changes in marital ideology and gender roles following the social and economic upheaval of World War I (Irvine 1990:31 – 33). She explains,

While Kinsey documented and verified the quantitative dimensions of sexual behavior, he also tapped the public's ambivalence about fluctuating sexual mores. For some his work was reassuring and for others outrageous. Yet Kinsey spoke to the cultural confusion about sexuality by offering the hope of scientific solutions to the crisis of gender and heterosexuality (33).

By the late 1960s, Kinsey's work had opened the door for others to pursue sex research, which furthered the transition of sexual discourse from the private to the public arena. The increased public discussion of sexuality in scientific terms bolstered a sexual ideology that privileged scientifically-based health concerns over religious edicts. For instance, comprehensive sex education advocates urged education programs and moral leaders to no longer condemn masturbation because there was no evidence of harmful effects (Irvine 2002:26). While sex researchers strived to present themselves as objective observers, their work remained "cloaked in the rationale that what is 'natural' is right, that sex is good and more is better" (Irvine 1990:37).

Kinsey and others condemned sanctions such as the sodomy laws in light of his findings that the so-called deviant behavior was prevalent and, therefore, “normal” (Mayo 2014:23).

This evidence-based, health-centered approach to sexuality furthered a sex positive morality that embraced diversity and transgression, placing few limits beyond “do no harm.” As such, it is an approach well suited to queered boundaries of sexual and gender identity. The term queer denotes a diverse, multiplicitous vision of sexuality in that it emphasizes the fluidity of sexuality and gender. Essentially signifying non-normative sexual orientation or gender identity, queer is an umbrella term that includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, asexual, demisexual, pansexual, transgender, transsexual, transvestite, genderqueer, genderf*ck, everything in between and more. It also includes heterosexuals whose sexual preferences are seen as non-normative and subject to prejudice, such as kink-aligned individuals or polyamorous persons (Burgett and Hendler 2014).

While what we would now describe as queer identity has been entwined with the gay liberation movement since its public emergence in the 1960s, queer theory did not emerge as an academic field until the late 1980s and early 1990s (Mayo 2014:24-29). Queer theory partly built on research-based understandings of sexuality such as the Kinsey scale, which conceptualized orientation as a sliding scale rather than stable identity categories. Queer theorists also drew from Michel Foucault’s (1976/1990) writings on sexuality, which argued against any view of sexuality as transhistorical, stable or authentic and instead looked at the process of sexual subject formation in historical and cultural context (Burgett and Hendler 2014).

The queer turn has become a major defining facet of third wave feminism. While first wave feminists sought to gain legal identity for women and second wave feminists fought for full human rights, such as equal employment opportunity and bodily integrity, third wave feminists have turned inwards, emphasizing individuality and diverse personal experiences. The sexual liberation

movement and sex wars of second wave feminism had a tremendous impact on women's sexual autonomy and freedom of expression, but third wave feminists critique the second wave's universalizing image of womanhood that obscured class, racial and sexual diversity (Budgeon 2016). By contrast, the third wave is a feminism of multiplicity. It is a feminism that rests comfortably in queerly unsettled, contradictory ideological spaces (Mahoney 2016; Dicker and Piepmeier 2016). For example, as Leslie Heywood notes in *Third Wave Agenda* (1997), the third wave "contains elements of second wave critique of beauty culture, sexual abuse and power structures while it also acknowledges and makes use of the pleasure, danger, and defining power of those structures." As part of this queer, label-defying individualism, third wave feminist activism emphasizes the sharing of unique, personal stories. *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation* (Findlen 1995) and *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism* (Walker 1995) were both influential texts asserting a feminist third wave that featured personal essays on experiences of sexism (Dicker and Piepmeier 2016:12).

Enjoying the legal and institutional gains of their predecessors, third wavers who came of age in the 1990s and onwards live in a more sexually progressive and formally gender equitable world. Within this climate, sexuality has taken center stage. Third wave feminism, sex positivism, the gay liberation movement and queer theory have all folded into a sexual health advocacy movement among youth online. The terms feminist, sex positive, and queer or queer-allied have become nearly interchangeable among progressive sexual health advocates.

EDUCATION AND ACTIVISM ONLINE

Along with queer theory and third wave feminism, the early 1990s saw the rise of the internet. Providing a new means of activism and community building, the internet has played an integral role in contemporary feminist and LGBTQ politics. The information economy of

cyberspace is ideal for a political approach that emphasizes individualism and diversity. Cyberspace enables individuals to find others who feel or think like them, even if their opinion or identity is in the minority in their geographic location. It allows persons vulnerable to prejudice to connect and participate in like-minded communities anonymously or to broadcast their lived experience and beliefs publicly.

LGBTQ youth have found the internet useful in circumventing restrictions placed on them in school. The first move to include sexual minorities in school curriculum was in the early 1990s, when New York City introduced the multicultural teachers' guide *Children of the Rainbow*. The guide suggested lessons on the diversity of family structures, including gay and lesbian families. Despite severe backlash from social conservatives, state-led changes have continued to push forward on inclusion of sexual minorities. For instance, in 2011, California passed a law requiring schools to adopt history textbooks that covered the contributions of LGBTQ people (Mayo 2014:32-33). However, significant barriers still remain. In 2004, a Gay Straight Alliance at a high school in Lubbock, Texas asked permission to post flyers that included a link to online information about LGBTQ issues. Not only was their request denied, but the incident led to the banning of all GSAs on Lubbock District school grounds. Because the website linked to other sites that discussed sex, the district claimed that the poster violated abstinence-only education policy. In *Caudillo vs. Lubbock Independent School District*, the court ruled that all GSA meetings were inherently obscene and therefore in violation of school policy. The reasoning went as follows:

The court ruling argues, essentially, that gay youth are gay because they can engage in sodomy, so just being gay means that sodomy must be part of the discussion and thus their right to associate is essentially a right to have sodomy, which as youth they do not have, so they also do not have a right to associate because the topics they would be discussing are obscene (Ayers, Quinn and Stovall 2009:323).

Although in this instance the GSA lost their right to meet, their impulse to post a link and the school district's wariness of where else that link may lead indicate both sides' awareness of how the internet provides access to a vast network of information beyond the school's control. Gay youth are more likely than their heterosexual peers to recognize the limitations of formal sex education and to seek out missing information online (Mustanski, Lyons and Garcia 2011; Mayo 2014). Moreover, online communities provide a network of support. Susan Driver (2006) argues that the digital sphere enables forms of public intimacy. Some queer youth find it easier to come out online than in person because they are further removed from potential negative reactions. The internet can also be a place to test out reactions to their identity anonymously or to be out within accepting online communities while still remaining closeted in their geographic location. For those living in conservative areas where the queer population is invisible, the internet can provide much needed connection that would otherwise be impossible to find. Online, they can engage with LGBTQ activity taking place in more progressive areas without moving to those locations. The internet also enables queer individuals within the same geographic location to find one another. Dating apps like Grindr, the hugely successful hookup app for gay men, have made it easier than ever for queer persons to find romantic and sexual connections whether or not they are out to the general community.

One notable way that YouTube has provided this connection is the "It Gets Better" project. Author Dan Savage and his partner Terry Miller started the project in September of 2010 in response to a number of LGBT students taking their own lives as a result of bullying. Aiming to provide online support for those who may not feel supported in their personal lives, Savage and Miller posted a videos of themselves telling LGBT youth that it does get better, and encouraged others to post similar videos. The campaign became a massive viral trend, with over 6,000 videos

submitted to the project website with the first year. Even President Obama contributed a video, saying, “I don’t know what it’s like to be picked on for being gay, but I do know what it’s like to grow up feeling like you don’t belong,” he says. “What I want to say is this: You are not alone. You didn’t do anything wrong... There are people out there who love you and care about you just the way you are” (Meckler 2010).

At times maligned as a digital “slacktivist” movement focused on sexy, frivolous pop culture, third wave feminists have a reputation for debating and promoting feminist ideology through social media engagement with entertainment media. Contemporary feminism’s focus on micro-politics, in which the everyday actions and language of the individual are scrutinized for their power to perpetuate or challenge inequality, thrives on social media, where individuals routinely publish their everyday thoughts and actions. “Call out” culture, where friends or celebrities alike are publicly shamed online for their tweets or Facebook posts, has become a mainstay of feminist rallying (Munro 2013). Simultaneously, these social media outlets become platforms for the individual to recount personal stories and conversations that demonstrate sexism, racism, homophobia, or transphobia.

Crowdsourced photography projects have become a popular trend in feminist digital activism, especially on Tumblr. Tumblr, the sixth most popular social media site in the US, is dominated by high school and college aged girls and is known for its queer and intersectional feminist leanings (Alexa 2016a). Project Unbreakable is one of the many activist photography projects launched on the site. The blog publishes photo submissions of survivors of sexual violence holding signs that tell their story, quote their abuser, or quote reactions from friends and family. In a classic example of “call out” culture, Project Unbreakable took part in the widespread criticism of Robin Thicke’s hit single, *Blurred Lines*. The song reached number one in the US and 24 other

countries, and was the longest running number one single of 2013 (McIntyre 2015; Ramirez 2013). Pharell Williams, who also worked on the song, contends that the full context suggests female agency and that the “blurred lines” are in reference to the line of acceptably a sexually desiring “good girl” must walk. However, critics argued that the song’s lyrics imply “blurred lines” between consensual sex and sexual assault, and that the predatory speaker is taking the subject’s body language as consent instead of her words. Submissions on Project Unbreakable showed survivors holding quotes from their rapists saying lines featured in or similar to the lyrics, such as, “I know you want it” (Koehler 2013).

Actress Amandla Stenberg is another prime example of third wave feminist engagement with social media. Stenberg gained fame for her role as Rue in the highly popular *Hunger Games* movies. The Ms. Foundation for Women named her “Feminist of the Year” in 2015, when she was just sixteen years old, for her outspoken support of LGBTQ rights and intersectional feminism on social media. Stenberg had posted a video on Tumblr earlier that year titled “Don’t Cash Crop on My Cornrows,” in which she critiqued recent instances of cultural appropriation in the music and high fashion industries. The video was reposted on YouTube, where it gained over 1.9 million views.

For Stenberg, the public sharing of her status and experience as a racial, sexual and gender minority is a political act. In January of 2016, Stenberg came out as bisexual on the social media app Snapchat, saying in a video, “It’s deeply bruising to fight against your identity and mold yourself into shapes you just shouldn’t be in. As someone who identifies as a black, bisexual woman I’ve been through it, and it hurts, and it’s awkward and it’s uncomfortable” (Howard 2016). She came out two months later as gender non-binary in a Tumblr post about her feminist identity, asking, “How do you claim a movement for women when you don’t always feel like

one?” (Stenberg 2016). Her Tumblr profile now lists her identity as bisexual, non-binary and states that she prefers either she/her or they/them pronouns. The star is also active and politically vocal on Twitter and Instagram. Her posts on these micro-blogging sites and apps are easily shared among social media users who support her message and pass it on through their “likes,” “shares,” “retweets” and “reblogs”. As a pop-culture celebrity herself and a casual critic of the entertainment industry, Stenberg’s comments also occupy the space of celebrity news entertainment. This mix of entertainment, education and queer sex-positive activism through personal sharing is the essence of YouTube sexual health vlogs.

YouTube was founded in 2005 as a way to easily upload and share videos between friends. From the start, YouTube had both amateur and professional videos. By mid-2006, it was the fifth most popular site globally (Alexa 2016b). Google acquired the site in 2006, at which point it increased advertising mechanisms and brought in more professional content creators. Overtime, YouTube has become less driven by sharing between amateur creators and more heavily supported by commercial content that YouTube chooses to feature. Nonetheless, amateur content, including vlogs, continues to flourish (Lange 2014). Currently, YouTube is the second most popular website globally and the third most popular in the United States (Alexa 2016b). YouTube viewers and content are extremely diverse, defying any simple summary. The range of YouTube content includes funny home videos, cute animal footage, comedy sketches, celebrity interviews, music videos, movie trailers, national and local news, political commentary, product reviews, tutorials and much more. According to a GWI report in 2015, 50% of 16-24 year olds and 25-34 year olds said they watched a vlog within the last month. 93% of vlog viewers watched on YouTube.

YouTube is designed to be interactive and amenable to sharing. The comment feature allows viewers to discuss the video with one another and to communicate with the video creator,

who in turn may respond in the comment section or in future videos. Each video also has a “share” button, which expedites copying the url, imbedding the video on another site, emailing the video, or sharing the video on any of thirteen listed social media sites, including Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Google+ and Reddit. Uploaders can choose to monetize original content by enabling advertisements on and around their videos in their account settings, provided they comply with community guidelines. YouTube takes approximately 45% of the advertising revenue. YouTube vloggers also frequently rely on sponsors for income. For example, one of the most popular vlog genres are beauty channels, in which the vlogger provides viewers with beauty tutorials. YouTube beauty gurus promote cosmetic products in each video or in dedicated “haul” videos, in which the vlogger discusses the quality and price of their product purchases. Although companies are eager to expose to their brands to the vast audiences of vloggers, the Global Web Index suggests that vloggers have a stronger influence in terms of social values and life advice than product promotion (2015).

The reality of sponsoring and monetization has called into question the authenticity of vlogs. The need for sponsors and advertisers can put pressure on content creators to maintain a clean image and to play up an entertaining public persona. Alice Marwick (2013) argues that the pursuit of internet fame leads social media users to engage in self-branding and life-streaming techniques that reinforce the class, racial and gender status quo. Furthermore, access to the viewing and production of online media is not equally available to all. Not everyone owns a computer and camera, and web filters and adult supervision can limit youth access to socially transgressive content (Mayo 2014). As YouTube has become increasingly commercial and professional, expectations of vlogging quality have exponentially increased. Shane Dawson began vlogging in 2008 with a low-quality webcam. Now that he has reached stardom and YouTube has become his

career, he employs professional-grade cameras, lighting, sets and staff. Other YouTube stars from the early days, such as Jenna Marbles and Tyler Oakley, have followed the same path. Seeing the success of these YouTubers, trained and experienced film professionals are now coming together in large scale projects made specifically for YouTube. Kids making vlogs from their bedroom with cheap, amateur equipment now have to compete with scores of channels boasting high quality production.

In the same vein, corporate media companies have begun coopting the sex-positive sexual health vlog for its value as successful entertainment and progressive activist branding. BuzzFeed has been especially persistent in its promotion of entertaining, sex-positive personal sharing. Their video “People Give Up Masturbation For A Month” (2015), combines vlogging style with the traditional talking-head interview. One female and three male twenty-somethings sit in front of a camera on the BuzzFeed set, reflecting on their expectations and, later, their experiences giving up masturbation for a month. These interview clips are interspersed with the subjects’ own vlogs taken on hand-held cameras over the course of the month. Like typical YouTube vlogs, they show the vloggers filming from their bedroom or out and about with friends. The video relishes in the entertainment potential of the taboo and includes intimate clips such as the female participant recording her drawer full of dildos that she must resist. They all describe themselves as stressed and irritable, and are thrilled when it is over, declaring they will never attempt it again. As one vlogger concludes, “We should be in tune with our sexuality.” Another adds, in reference to her irritability, “I one hundred percent have a greater appreciation for it, just because I didn’t realize what a role masturbation played in being a healthier, nicer person to other people.”

BuzzFeed, which began as a website focused on producing viral entertainment, has a number of these sex-positive, personal sharing videos on YouTube. The women in the video

“Women Share the First Time They Masturbated” (2015) urge viewers not to feel ashamed of their sexuality and ask, “If men can talk about it, why can’t we?” Their numerous video on trans issues include “Transgender-Cisgender Couples Talk About Their Relationships” (2015) and “Questions Cis Women Have For Transwomen” (2016). Similar videos exist for polyamorous, bisexual, gay, lesbian, and asexual issues, among others. BuzzFeed also has a series called “But I’m Not...” in which various speakers belonging to a given identity say how they do not fit the common stereotype. All of these videos frequently involve successful YouTubers. For example, vlogger Gabby Dunn appears in the video “Ask A Polyamorous Person” (2014) among a cast of other polyamorous persons answering questions from BuzzFeed viewers.

Although BuzzFeed has shifted over time towards more traditional and in-depth content, its notoriety as shallow, click-bait media geared towards viral sharing has stuck. Many have critiqued its anti-racist, feminist and LGBTQ-aligned videos for pandering to a liberal audience without providing much educational substance. The BuzzFeed video “36 Questions Women Have For Men” (2016) went viral for unintended reasons, sparking a slew of “36 Questions Answered” videos that mocked the original. One response video, by YouTuber June Nicole, has gained over 1.2 million views, exceeding the original video’s view count by roughly 40,000 as of April 2016. In her video, “‘questions’ for men answered by a woman,” Nicole answers such questions as “How does it feel being the same gender as Donald Trump?” with the response, “How does it feel being the same gender as Sarah Palin? ...I feel nothing!” She criticizes the video for quickly hitting feminist grievances without providing any explanation or nuance and for taking a hostile tone towards men instead of opening a dialogue. While some BuzzFeed videos may provide useful information, visibility and support for feminists, sexual minorities and allies, the company exemplifies a corporate adoption of YouTube’s sexual health vlogging that exploits the

marketability of sexual personal sharing without the depth, community building and presumed (relative) authenticity involved in individual, amateur vlogging.

Vlogs, interviews, tutorials, crash course videos and lecture recordings are just a few of the ways YouTube serves as an education platform. The list of video genres suggested under the website's "Browse Channels" tab includes a Science & Education section, and YouTube's #Education page provides a vast collection of lesson videos from diverse channels, on everything from mathematics to business to foreign language. Educator Salman Khan was quick to realize YouTube's education potential back in 2006, when he founded Khan Academy. The non-profit organization now boasts over 2.5 million subscribers and produces educational YouTube videos on a wide range of subjects. Khan Academy's professed mission is "to provide world-class education for anyone, anywhere" (Khan Academy n.d.).

Professional sexual health educators have joined the ranks of YouTube education channels. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention channels depict health professionals listing facts on contraception and STI prevention. Bedsider, a free support network for birth control, offers a range of videos such as informative comedy sketches, pronunciation guides and testimonials on the pros and cons of various contraception methods. Individual sex educators and sex therapists also provide more pleasure focused advice, such as sex toy reviews or tips for anal sex. Lifestyle and entertainment media companies, such as BuzzFeed or AskMen, also offer pleasure-focused sex tips and relationship advice on YouTube.

The sexual health vlogs I have chosen to discuss are distinct in a few key ways. First, each channel is run by a single vlogger who provides information on sexuality by sharing about their own sex life. Secondly, with the exception of Laci Green, none of the vloggers I cover are professional sexual health educators. Their channels are not focused on sexual health. Rather, they

are YouTubers who regularly vlog about their life, and some of those vlogs happen to discuss sexuality. I chose to include Green—a certified sex educator whose channel is exclusively about sexual health – due to her fame as “the” sexual health guru of YouTube, her frequent incorporation of personal information about herself, and her tactic of interviewing guests about their sex lives. I focus primarily on non-professionals because they are far more likely to share sensitive personal information and because I am interested in the public sharing of sexual information as a trend among queer, sex positive youth rather than as a trend in the field of sex education. This brings me to the final distinction, which is that the vloggers I analyze are all in their teens or twenties. This age distinction came about naturally as a result of the popularity of vlogging among younger YouTubers, and it speaks to this trend as one of peer education.

THE VALUE OF OVERSHARING

Sex education necessitates talking about sex, and healthy sexual practices require communication with your partner and your doctor. In part, personal confession is a way of dispelling the sense of awkwardness, secrecy and shame surrounding sexuality so that we can get talking and foster more informed, safe, and fulfilling sexual practices. On the other hand, the taboo on sharing personal sex stories is precisely what makes them sell. Sex talk is entertaining, especially when it borders on a scandalous overshare. In this way, sexual confessions are an effective vehicle for spreading a health advocate’s message and a profitable venture for YouTube vloggers. In this section, I will outline a few cases of sexual confession videos created in the name of sexual health advocacy and analyze the ways in which their flirtation with the taboo plays a key role in bolstering the video’s message and success.

A basic value of health advocacy confession videos is that they lead by example. “Let’s Talk about Sex” is a title that crops up throughout sexual health media pieces, from the CDC’s PSA on STDs (2012) to a New York Times’ article on sex education (Rochman 2015). In addition

to being a catchy Salt-n-Pepa reference, “Let’s Talk about Sex” is a popular phrase because it gets to the heart of the problem: talking about sex is awkward. Sexual health advocates often put themselves forth as exemplars of the mature, unabashed approach we should all take towards sexual health conversations. For instance, Planned Parenthood (2015) describes their YouTube channel A Naked Notion, starring sex educator Laci Green, as “a sex information project dedicated to frank, open conversations about sexuality,” and a common theme in the channel’s videos is the importance of viewers having frank, open conversations about sex in their personal lives. “Getting over that embarrassing little hump of talking about it out loud can do wonders for your sex life,” says Green (2014a).

However, Laci Green’s easy discussion of sexuality is situated in the context of an expert talking to an audience interested in her field of knowledge. Her “frank, open conversations” about general sex information are a world away from the “frank, open conversations” she encourages among her viewers, which are much more intimate and personal. The same can be said of Lindsey Doe’s popular YouTube channel Sexplanations (2015). While Doe, a sexologist with a doctorate in human sexuality, often emphasizes the importance of communication, her own discussion of sexuality is clinical, scholarly and general. On the occasion that Green or Doe do connect the discussion to themselves (as when Green mentions in her video on birth control that she uses an IUD), their disclosure is located within the highly appropriate space of a channel set aside to talk about sex. In other words, their context as sex education channels and sexual health professionals weaken the direct applicability of their confessions to the communicative hurdles in the lives of their viewers. By contrast, YouTube vloggers (video bloggers) whose channels are not focused on sexual health are in a rich position to lead by example when it comes to tackling embarrassment.

One vlogger who has chosen to promote sexual health through confession is twenty-two-year-old Carrie Hope Fletcher. Fletcher is an English musician, writer, and musical theater actress.

Her YouTube channel It's Way Past My Bed Time has over 560,000 subscribers and is primarily dedicated to sharing stories from her life, often culminating in life advice. In her video "Let's Talk about Sexual Health: Getting Tested" (2015), Fletcher recounts getting tested for STIs for the first time earlier that week. She clarifies that she had no symptoms, but that any sexually active person is at risk and she wanted "peace of mind." She begins as follows:

Sexual health is hugely important, but it's one of these subjects that everyone treats as taboo and it's embarrassing to talk about it. Especially in Britain where we have this whole stiff upper lip attitude where we're like, "No, you can't talk about sex. It's too inappropriate and embarrassing and we should just leave it all together and just be quiet about the whole thing." And I completely disagree with that attitude towards talking about sex. If we just have these conversations openly and honestly, I feel like a lot more people would be better informed and therefore safer and healthier.

Despite her proclaimed belief that sex is nothing to be secretive about, Fletcher admits that walking the talk is challenging: "I thought going to the clinic and getting tested was going to be one of the most embarrassing experiences of my life... I was preparing myself for the worst." This feeling makes her more relatable to the target audience: those who share her embarrassment. It also shows that the shyness we may feel about sex can prevent healthy practices beyond communication. She explicitly states that the reason she is making this video is so that her viewers are aware that testing is important and so that "it might encourage some of you guys to go and get tested too if you've been putting it off or you feel embarrassed about it, or worst case scenario, you've actually got symptoms and you're too embarrassed to tell anyone about them." The remainder of the video is dedicated to telling her viewers how wonderful the clinic was: easy to navigate, friendly staff, and not embarrassing at all.

While her overall experience was cheerful, Fletcher encourages the audience's empathy by emphasizing her sense of ignorance and bewilderment. She tells of walking up to the receptionist and asking, "Hi, I'm really sorry, I've not been here before. I wanna get checked out. How do I go

about doing this?” At the end of the visit, she asks the nurse, “This might be a really stupid question, but is there anything else I need to do while I’m here?” Most notably, Fletcher’s positive experience has not magically evaporated her sense of embarrassment about sex. One of the main reasons “the Dean Street clinic was incredible” was because its technology allowed for an unusually private process. She praises their silent touchscreen, saying it asked “all of the uncomfortable questions I was dreading answering. I was so relieved and so thankful that I didn’t have to answer these questions face to face with another human being.” Another touch screen on the wall of a private room played a tutorial for her on how to carry out the swab test herself, “without having to go through the embarrassment of showing someone my foof. I was in heaven.” Still, the key message is that Fletcher gathered her courage and visited the clinic even before she knew such privacy would be available. She is careful to note that, “Even though not all clinics are gonna be like the Dean Street Express, they’re still there to care for and help you and they will still be completely confidential and nonjudgmental.” Fletcher’s confession may seem mild in comparison to *Essence*’s questions on sexual fantasy and orgasm. But to Fletcher, and likely to thousands of her viewers, the admission that she was tested for STIs is far from innocuous. She explains, “Another thing that I was worried about prior to getting tested was that I would be judged.” She was relieved to find instead that the people were friendly and they “made me feel like I was welcome to go back whenever I wanted.” She also had to remind herself not to be embarrassed in front of the other visitors because “you guys are all here for the same reason.” It is safe to say that if Fletcher was anxious of being judged by staff and fellow visitors for attending the clinic, then posting a public video about her visit for thousands of strangers to see likely caused some discomfort as well. From early on in the video, she claims that it is important to have “these conversations,” as in the conversation she is having with her viewers, even though they “are a little bit embarrassing and a little bit cringe-worthy.” In short, Fletcher’s sexual health video is a prime

example of how a confession can lead by example, showing viewers that it is normal to be embarrassed, and that overcoming those feelings is doable and important.

Green's confidence in sexual discussions does not lend itself to the same type of confession, but she has nonetheless created a number of videos that incorporate self-disclosure with different merits. For one, her casual, quick mentions of personal connections to the topic at hand treat the information as unremarkable, thereby driving home the message that sex is truly not shameful more convincingly than Fletcher's "this is embarrassing, but we can do it" attitude. For instance, in her Naked Notion video "COMIN' OUT! (Bisexuality)" (2012), Green explains the different forms of coming out, their benefits, how to manage risks, and the particular challenges in coming out as bisexual. The video is three minutes and thirty seconds, of which only ten seconds are spent talking about her own sexuality, once she is already two minutes in. Green does not overtly "announce" her bisexuality, but rather weaves it seamlessly into her monologue as though it holds no more weight than the impersonal advice and information in the rest of the video:

Of course, make sure you're doing it for you. When I was younger, I definitely felt some pressure to come out as bi and to prove that I was, you know, a 'real' bisexual, like it was something that I owed to other people. Secret time: I didn't know shit and neither do you. So don't be afraid to take your time and do it when it feels right for you.

The videos from Green that do focus on personal revelations as their central content are ones that involve a guest. Notably, none such videos exist on her Planned Parenthood channel, A Naked Notion. Instead, they can be found on her less formal original channel, Laci Green, which has over 1,200,000 subscribers and is dedicated to sex education.

One value of having a guest confession is that celebrity guests can bring in viewers who were not originally searching for sex education content. In one video, Green (2013) interviews writer and former child star Mara Wilson, from hit nineties films like *Matilda* (1996) and *Mrs.*

Doubtfire (1993). The video covers how Wilson learned about sex in school, how she was sexualized in the public eye as she grew up, and what it was like losing her virginity. The tone of the video purposefully rejects the notion of sex talk as uncomfortable or scandalous. Instead, their conversation is casual, confident and informative. Regarding her first time, Wilson recalls:

It was pretty anti-climactic, literally and figuratively. We'd been dating for years and we were very safe. We knew we were both very ready and we were really in love and we really trusted each other and we were each other's best friends. We were gonna use two forms of birth control every single time. It was also good because I felt like we could laugh about it if things weren't going well or if things were uncomfortable, which as it turns out they kinda were. I could tell him like, "No don't do that. Please do this, please don't do this," and it felt good. Like, I have no regrets about that.

Green points out four things for her viewers to take away from Wilson's account as good advice: trust, communication, protection, and feeling ready. The video is upbeat but rarely humorous, and the occasional jokes made are unrelated to the potential awkwardness of sex talk. Wilson's first comment on sexuality captures the overall message: "I think it's important to accept sex as a part of life and as a healthy part of life, and as a positive part of life, and to be responsible about it." Acceptance and positivity – not shame – should guide the way we discuss sex, and Wilson provides an example of what that looks like.

While celebrity guest confessions – especially from YouTube celebrities – are a repeat occurrence on Green's channel, at other times a guest is preferred because Green feels they would be a more qualified and appropriate speaker. For instance, in "Sex with Disabilities" (2014b), Green invites her friend and student activist Olivia to discuss how muscular dystrophy has affected her love life. In this case, the use of personal revelation has less to do with dispelling embarrassment and more to do with asserting agency and voice within a marginalized group. Personal connection to the content is considered key to accuracy, as can be seen when Olivia declines to speak at length about intellectual disabilities, saying, "This topic is a little difficult for

me to discuss because it's not my experience.”² The video includes, among other things, Olivia's admission that she is currently sexually active with her boyfriend of three years and a demonstration of how her wheelchair can be manipulated to facilitate sex. Her overall message is, “Honestly, it's not that different from dating someone who's able-bodied.” While the video involves bringing private matters to public light, its message is not focused on the taboo of discussing sex with disabilities, but rather the ignorance of its existence. Still, the ease with which the two discuss Olivia's sex life enforces the channel's constant message that sex can and should be talked about. As Olivia says, “Communication starts from day one. You always have to be having that conversation of what you're comfortable with, what you're not comfortable with and what you're capable of doing.”

As the videos with Wilson and Olivia illustrate, Green's approach to encouraging communication is typically to show how normal and easy it is to talk about sex. However, she does at times play with the taboo for the sake of entertainment. In “Juicy Secrets w/ Joey Graceffa!” (2014c) Green and fellow YouTube celebrity Graceffa take turns picking sex and dating questions out of a hat. These include questions about their first kisses, ultimate turn ons, whether they “wait before getting sexual,” what their current partner is like, and more. As the title implies, the point of the video is the fun in disclosing private information, and giggles, gasps and exclamations abound throughout. Occasionally, Green does weave in general relationship information. When Graceffa says that open relationships never work out in the end, Green chimes in, “Fun fact: I do know some people who have had long-term open relationships. That's their thing, and they've been doing it for like fifteen years, and that's just their life.” On another question asking whether

² For first-hand information on sexuality and intellectual disability, see the semi-autobiographical work “Sex, Sexuality and the Autism Spectrum” by openly gay autistic writer Wendy Lawson (Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2005). For a more comprehensive look at sex and disability, see Robert McRuer and Anna Mollow's interdisciplinary collection of essays, “Sex and Disability” (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

Graceffa has ever been in love, he says he isn't sure what's considered love, and Green provides some input: "People think of romantic love as this separate thing from the love you have for your parents or your siblings or something, but I've found that it's actually very similar. Really, really fiercely caring about someone, and they're so intertwined with your life they're like your blood." These answers are as close to education as Green gets in this video.

Although the overall point of Green's channel is sexual health education, "juicy secrets" type videos help to provide some light-hearted variety to retain the interest of her subscribers and bring in new viewers through a celebrity. Graceffa currently has over 4,500,000 subscribers and joined Green in standard YouTube cross-collaboration fashion, posting an "Advice with Laci!" video to his own channel and directing viewers to check out her channel for the "juicy secrets" version. While the video is hyped as a revelation of secrets, and private sex and dating information is revealed, Green does not venture far into the sexual taboo. For example, when Graceffa draws a question on his first kiss, Green jokingly urges him to "describe it in graphic detail," the joke being that a kiss is a relatively tame sexual act. When asked to describe her partner, Green only vaguely states that he is "a really awesome person," and when asked about turn ons, they each give distinctly unprovocative answers: "an open mind" and "confidence." Whenever a response garners raised eyebrows and gasps, it is a playfully exaggerated, teasing reaction. For instance, when Green draws the question on whether she has ever cheated or been cheated on, she begins with an abashed expression, saying, "Well..." Graceffa gasps and gives the camera a shocked, excited smile, before Green answers, "No, no, no, I really didn't know that this person considered us in a relationship!" All of their questions and responses are similarly tame, posing little risk to their reputations.

Male guests like Graceffa are a minority in within the world of sexual health vlogging. One reason sexual health bears a special significance to women in particular is that female bodies are the ones at risk of becoming pregnant; they are the ones who have to give birth, undergo an

abortion, access daily birth control pills or emergency contraception and so on. Another aspect, and one especially relevant to confession, is that women bear a greater risk of stigma than men when exercising and discussing their sexuality. Therefore, their confessions carry the added weight of rejecting traditional gendered restrictions on sexuality. Sexual health advocacy is thus closely tied to the feminist goal of women's sexual liberation. In her "Not Awkward" article for Bedsider.org, Charreah Jackson (2013) references a birth control advocacy video for *Essence Magazine* in which she interviewed women about their sex lives:

I recently hit the streets of New York with a big sign that said "Let's Talk About Sex." As the granddaughter of a southern woman who avoided even saying the word—she would say 'seg' if she absolutely had to reference the act—I had come a long way in finding my sexual voice as I waved women over to be interviewed for a web series.

Essence and Bedsider are both women oriented, and Jackson makes a clear connection between femaleness and the struggle to find one's "sexual voice." Her first tip on her list for talking about birth control is, "Embrace your sexual self." As she explains, this involves getting in touch with your sense of sexual pleasure:

Get comfortable embracing the fact you were born a sexual being—even if that means setting a monthly date on your Google calendar to explore your sensuality. The more you engage with your own sexual identity, the more empowered you'll be to take charge in and outside the bedroom.

Jackson's suggestion to accept one's own sexuality echoes Mara Wilson's emphasis on accepting sex as healthy and positive, and indeed feminism is an explicit component of Green's interview with Wilson. Green questions how growing up in the public eye impacted Wilson's sexual health in terms of her emotional and mental well-being. Wilson explains:

A lot of female child stars will think that to grow up is to be sexy... It did definitely affect the way that I grew up and the way that I viewed my body. This happens with a lot of young women who grow up in the public eye. They feel like their bodies are not their own. Any time I do any kind of

appearance, “She should do her hair differently. She should do this, she should do that,” you know, “She’s really ugly now, blah blah blah blah blah.” And I’m like guys, you know what? My appearance is not for you.

Wilson identifies herself as a feminist, saying that feminism is “about women being judged for what they do, their actions, things like that, rather than their genitals or their appearance or their identity, or something like that.” To this Green adds, “Yeah, being more than just a body that can deliver pleasure to other people.” The notion that a woman’s sexual health involves claiming her sexuality for herself—rather than seeing it as something that exists for and is controlled by others—is what makes sexual questions not merely a marketing ploy or a rejection of awkwardness, but a healthy, feminist assertion of female sexual agency. As Jackson phrases it, her interviews were an example of women finding their “sexual voices” and embracing their “sexual selves” so that they may “take charge” of their sexual health. Unapologetic talk of having orgasms, fantasies and sex is an affirmation that we are each a sexual being with our own pleasure to celebrate and attend to, rather than “a body that can deliver pleasure to other people.”

Green names the lack of sufficient sex education in schools as one reason why she decided to provide sex education YouTube. In her discussion with Wilson, Green explains, “One of my big criticisms of the way that America does sex ed is that it’s very fear driven. It’s all about making you scared and terrified and not actually about giving you information.” Not only does Green consider the derogation of sexuality an ethical failure, but she is a firm believer in the effectiveness of a positive, celebratory approach.

Still, if pushing the boundaries on sex talk is to be encouraged, how do you know when it is too much? Bedsider (2015) addressed this concern in a post titled, “TMI: Can you really share too much?” In it, they acknowledge their constant push for readers to talk openly about sex, saying, “You know how much we appreciate honest conversations about sexual health and birth control.

And we love talking intimately about life and relationships. We also love it when you're chatty, effusive, candid, and loquacious." Even so, they caution, not everyone in your life will be comfortable with you talking about sex. Whether the topic is your birth control or your favorite sex positions, Bedsider encourages you to feel out your audience:

If a person is important to you and you respect their comfort level, we think it's okay to watch what you say and try to make your point with some sensitivity. We don't want you to shrink your voice or be someone you're not. We just think there's room to express your thoughts and experiences in different ways depending on your audience.

This particular piece of advice is oriented to in-person discussions, and would arguably give a free pass to online confession videos, considering that the audience is self-selected. Everyday Health, on the other hand, puts greater focus on the potential consequences for the sharer and the sharer's partner, particularly in the digital age. Consulting the expertise of two (female) psychologists who specialize in marriage and sex therapy, respectively, Everyday Health's Beth Orenstein (2013) tells us "The Dos and Don'ts of Talking about Your Sex Life." According to Orenstein, we should feel free to talk to our partners, sex therapist and—if we've gotten the okay from our partner first—our trusted friends. We should not be talking about our sex life with "the town gossip," on a public online post, or even in a private online message if we have not yet met the recipient in person. In short, Orenstein's experts believe that one's personal sex information only belongs in a few, carefully chosen hands.

To be fair, when Orenstein says "sex talk," she is primarily thinking in terms of sharing one's "sex-capades." It is unclear what Orenstein would have to say about one's trip to the Dean Street Clinic or choice of birth control, or what precisely she believes to be the consequences of oversharing, other than the vague concern that you "open yourself up to all kinds of chatter" and risk having stories heard by "the wrong people." The impact on one's partner is a salient point.

Perhaps Green was wise to limit her partner's description to "a really awesome person." Not all sexual health confessors take this precaution. One YouTuber, Sarah Rae Vargas, produces a series titled "Let's Talk About Sex" in which she frequently references her sexual activities with her current and past boyfriends in the process of advising her viewers. Vargas (2015) describes herself as "a twenty-something mother of two toddlers" who runs a fashion and beauty blog in addition to her YouTube channel. Her "Let's Talk About Sex" series is one of many on her channel, including a "Body Confidence" series, "How To's," "Product Reviews," and casual day-in-the-life vlogs. Her channel has over 300,000 subscribers. Like Fletcher, Vargas is not a professional sexual health educator. As such, she relies solely on personal beliefs and experiences to advise her viewers, whom she describes as mostly "young" (Vargas 2014a) Among her wide variety of sexual health videos, one can find: instruction on oral sex and sexting, a body positivity video titled "My Weird Vajayjay," tips on feminine hygiene, how to respond to "prom night pressure," and advice for women who are uncomfortable with their partners watching pornography.

Vargas is more explicit in her sexual confessions than the aforementioned confessors. For instance, in her video "A Little Rough" (2014a) she provides a show-and-tell of her various sex toys and personal tips that could be useful for a beginner to submission and dominance play, including her favorite handcuffs and whips. In encouraging her viewers to explore and figure out what works for them, she recounts, "I've had the experience of being choked and of being spanked so hard that his handprints were literally left on my ass in the form of bruising. I couldn't walk straight. I've had some painful experiences and that is just not for me, not at all. I have discovered that. But it's for some people, and that's cool." It is not uncommon for Vargas to integrate brief mentions of her boyfriend's actions, likes and dislikes, as when she comments, "Some people don't like incorporating things like this. Like, my guy, he wouldn't be interested in getting whipped in the bedroom, but of course a hand can do just as well." However, at other times her accounts of

partners can be more revealing and critical. In her video “Losing My Virginity” (2014c), she recalls her experience with her former high school boyfriend of three years. Vargas describes him as follows:

He was like really heavy, okay? I’m talking north of 400 pounds. He was a big dude and he was real’ short. It wasn’t like muscular, like he was a *big* dude. And his penis was not big at all. It had some girth, because of course it would have to have some, right? When your body’s that big your junk is bound to be a little thick. But it was really, really, really short, like maybe four inches hard. Like, it wouldn’t escape my palm if I had my hand wrapped around it. So it was pretty small, so it didn’t really hurt because he didn’t get very deep, and he never got deep in all the years that we dated because he couldn’t.

She goes on to describe in detail the positions they tried that night and emotional problems over the course of their relationship with lying and insecurity, including the fact that “he was a little insecure about his thang.” She mentions mistakes she made in her approach to their relationship and in terms of protection, telling her viewers what she would have done differently and responding to questions viewers sent her about losing their virginity.

Vargas’s approach does have some notable advantages. For one, her willingness to delve into fairly graphic revelations demonstrates a significant commitment to shameless, open sex talk. Additionally, her highly detailed, contextualized accounts of personal exploits may make her advice more memorable and understandable than general maxims of the Mara Wilson variety. However, Vargas does not clarify whether she asks permission from her current boyfriend before posting information about their sex life, and it is unlikely that the man she describes in “Losing My Virginity” would be pleased by the description. While Vargas does not reveal his name, it is not outside the realm of possibility that an old classmate or one of his family members might come across her videos and know whose intimate insecurities she’s revealing. In telling this story, Vargas risks violating her ex-boyfriend’s privacy.

It is important to consider whether the close line Vargas walks by divulging partner information is worth its potential benefits. Fletcher demonstrates that there are embarrassing humps to cross far removed from sex itself. Green shows that it is possible to pass on the wisdom of personal sex experience and even play up the entertainment value in the idea of the taboo without actually delving into graphic detail. Even when one wants to shock, it is possible to share purely individual information without risking the comfort of a partner. With such an array of sexual information categories and confessional styles available to the curious and voluntary online surfer, perhaps the only line to draw for sexual health advocate confessors is their own comfort levels and that of their partners'. Although these public confessors are addressing certain topics specifically because many consider them too personal to comfortably share with even their most intimate circle, the confessors maintain a level of acceptability by using a platform and context wherein the viewer was likely searching for that information and stands to gain from its being shared. In the end, the demonstration of female sexual agency as well as the educational value, entertainment and—perhaps most importantly—normalization of sex talk that comes from individuals publicly discussing their sexuality appear to make confession a fruitful method of sexual health advocacy.

TRANS VLOGGERS AND THE ORIENTATION QUESTION

“Coming out” videos are a particular type of sexual confession that are immensely popular on YouTube. Publicly coming out on video is a powerful rejection of stigma, and video allows the viewer to observe the emotions of the individual in what is often a tearful moment. The intense intimacy of these moments has resulted in countless viral coming out videos. The most watched coming out video, at 22.3 million views, is of twin brothers coming out to their father over the phone, in which you see two very masculine, handsome young men break down into tears when their father says that he still loves them (Rhodes Bros 2015). Yet, as Dawson (2015) mentions in his coming out video, sexual orientation is not always stable and clear. He explains,

There's a lot of coming out videos of people who are gay or lesbian and they're so confident. They're like, I've known since I was five. I've always been gay. The Ingrid [Nilsen] video was fucking the best video I've ever seen. I loved it. But it made me cry because I'm not that. I don't know who I am 100% and I know a lot of you guys might feel the same way.

YouTube vloggers like Dawson have the opportunity to explore the gray areas of sexual well-being and sexual identity in that their viewers gain an in-depth understanding of them and their individual sexuality overtime. Additionally, YouTube vloggers are often engaged in a networked community with other vloggers, who may share different or even contradictory views and experiences. In this section, I focus on one specific sexual issue that is significantly marked by confusion and complexity: the sexual orientation of trans people and their partners.

Gender identity and sexual orientation have long been confused in medical and popular discourse. The gender deviance of butch lesbians and effeminate gay men and the fact that many trans individuals come out as homosexual before coming out as trans has created tension and debate on the line between lesbian and gay identities and trans identities. The question of how to label trans individuals' sexual orientation and that of their partners has posed an especially complex problem as the diverse and transitioning bodies of trans people challenge assumptions inherent in gender-based sexual orientation categories such as "heterosexual" and "homosexual." YouTube, with its propensity for sharing the personal, has become a platform where transgender vloggers use their own lives and relationships in real time to address these questions of transgender sexuality.

YouTube vlogs have become a powerful site for discussing trans issues in that they resonate as intimate and authentic testimonies to trans life. As public self-representations, these vlogs present trans identity with pride and optimism, defying stigma and pathologization (Raun 2015). Most mainstream depictions of transgenderism in movies, documentaries or interviews are

created for and by cisgendered people and are far removed from the viewer. Vlogs, by contrast, tend to implement a “talking head” style that functions almost like a conversation between the viewer and the trans speaker. They show the vlogger from the waist up, directly and informally addressing the viewer in the tone of a familiar friend. Viewers can respond through YouTube comments, private messages, video responses, email and social media, in turn getting a response through the same medium or in the vlogger’s next video (Horak 2014) Vloggers are, traditionally, amateur creators whose content focuses on the vlogger’s own life, featuring autobiographical stories, current major events, emotional ups and downs, and personal opinions. This intimate, interactive style fosters the sense of a meaningful connection between vlogger and subscriber. Trans vloggers use their channels to find community with other trans people and trans supporters, to document their lives for their own purposes, to exercise DIY talk therapy, and—most explicitly—to provide education and guidance on trans issues (Raun 2012).

One such issue is the border between trans identity and gay and lesbian identities. Although homosexual men and women can land anywhere in the range of femininity and masculinity, homosexual desire is stereotypically associated with transgressive gender expression. And although transgender individuals have diverse sexual orientations, many are attracted to the same biological sex and come out as gay or lesbian before coming out as transgender. Additionally, as a result of gender ambiguous bodies and shifts in identity, a number of out trans men are in relationships with lesbians and a number of out trans women are in relationships with gay men (Brown 2009; Brown 2010). As such, the line between effeminate gay men and transwomen or butch lesbians and transmen can become blurred and confused. Some early diagnoses of transsexuality described it as a coping mechanism for a homosexual orientation, and some medical practitioners considered post-transition heterosexuality as a requirement of successful gender

transition and integration (Abbott 2013). As transgenderism began gaining more visibility in the later decades of the twentieth century, transmen and transwomen came under fire and still encounter hostility from anti-trans feminists who accuse them of essentializing gender and perpetuating oppressive gender norms. Similarly, gay and lesbian activists have accused trans individuals of a homophobic adherence to gendered sexual norms (Halberstam 1998).

YouTubers Julie Vu and Giselle Loren Lazzarato, better known as Princess Joules and Gigi Gorgeous, respectively, embody this confusion in their own public transition. Transition vlogs have become a genre of their own on YouTube, taking hold with a group of mostly female-to-male trans vloggers in 2006, the same year YouTube gained mass popularity (Raun 2015). Vu joined YouTube in 2010, and Lazzarato joined YouTube in 2008. Both have become successful micro-celebrities, with Vu boasting over 400,000 subscribers and Lazzarato over 2.2 million subscribers as of April 2016. Yet unlike the typical trans YouTuber who begins vlogging with the intention of documenting their transition, Vu and Lazzarato first gained a following on YouTube as self-identified gay teenage boys posting make-up tutorials.

Despite the gender-bending subject of their channels, both explicitly assured their viewers of their male identity and gay orientation in their early videos. For Vu, this took the form of the standard YouTube “coming out” video (since deleted) in which then-Julian Vu announces to his viewers that he is gay. Lazzarato assumed his viewers would infer his sexual orientation from his flamboyant mannerisms, YouTube name (then Gregory Gorgeous) and interest in make-up, and makes casual reference to his gay identity in numerous early videos in addition to his “My Coming Out Story” video about coming out as gay to family and peers. Lazzarato even directly refutes suspicions about his gender identity in multiple videos. In “Haters=Hearts” from 2009, just one year and nine videos into his YouTube career, Lazzarato discusses how he deals with bullying

over his sexual orientation and gender expression, characteristics that were at the time inextricably entwined in his Gregory Gorgeous entertainment persona. In this video, Lazzarato asserts that he has no interest in being a girl, saying, “I know kids in my school that have written on my YouTube calling me a faggot, telling me to put on a wig and a dress and just be a girl. Like, stupid shit like that. Like, if I wanted to be a girl, I would, you know what I mean? Obviously I wanna be a boy.” In one breath, Lazzarato connects homophobic hatred from viewers with challenges to his male gender identity. He clarifies his male identity again a year and a half later in his “Question & Answer #2” (2010) video, at which point he has begun to style himself in noticeably more androgynous clothing and hair styles and has moved beyond the natural image of his early make-up tutorials to more distinctly feminine looks, including mascara, lipstick and blush. In his Q & A, Lazzarato explains:

Okay, so number one: “Have you ever thought about getting a sex change?” Honestly when I was younger, and I was like playing with girls at recess and like skipping rope with them and stuff like that, I always used to think, like, “Oh my God, I’m a girl trapped inside this boy’s body,” like, “I need to get a sex change when I get older,” like, “I’m just a girl,” right? Like, “I don’t like doing what the boys do.” But then when I got older I was like, “Oh my god, what was I thinking?” Like, fucking periods and birth and stuff? No thank you. And I like being a boy, you know what I’m saying? Like you guys, people who have watched me for a long time know that just because I wear make-up and just because I like wearing girls clothes does not mean that I wanna be a girl. That’s a very closed minded way of thinking and that’s something that pisses me off, when people just assume like, “Oh he wears make-up, he wants to be a girl.” That’s like, really sad. Like, shut the fuck up.

Nearly a year later, Lazzarato continued to push back against comments on his feminine gender expression in a video titled, “What’s TOO Gay?!” (2011). The video begins with Lazzarato

explaining, “Throughout my years living on this earth as a homosexual, I’ve often been categorized as too gay. But that begs the question, what is too gay?” The video then cuts to Lazzarato wearing pink, sparkly high heels, women’s skinny jeans and a women’s frilled, low cut T-shirt while performing stereotypically feminine actions: popping his heel and giggling, asking if his butt looks big, sitting down to pee, and ranting about a difficult boyfriend to a female friend over the phone. At the end of each scene, Lazzarato smiles to the camera and sarcastically asks, “Oh, sorry, too gay?” These video responses to comments on her feminine expression highlight the public’s ambivalence and Lazzarato’s own struggle to determine whether her femininity was a facet of her gender identity or her sexual orientation.

The question of how to differentiate between a transwoman identity and an effeminate gay male identity is one that Vu mocks as comically ignorant and rude in a video created after her transition. The video, titled “SH*T TRANSGENDER PEOPLE HEAR ALL THE TIME” (2015a), features Vu playing a well-meaning but ditzy cisgendered female friend. Among the unintentionally offensive questions the cisgendered character asks Vu is, “How do you know you’re not just like really really really gay?” Yet, due to their public insistence that they identify as cisgendered gay men—and their many videos cultivating their feminine expression as part of a stereotypical “fabulous” gay personality—Vu and Lazzarato were constantly faced with this question from their viewers after they came out as transgender. Lazzarato came out as trans in 2014, five years into her YouTube career, and Vu came out in 2011, one year into her YouTube career. According to Lazzarato (2013), she had “felt for a very long time now that [she] was a girl trapped inside of a boy’s body,” but delayed coming to terms with her gender identity due to the stigma of being trans and a lack of education on the subject. In “TRANSGENDER Q&A - Part I” (2014), Lazzarato explains:

I would say the hardest thing for me is kind of going back on my word. I know that a lot of you guys were saying that, you know on my Instagram comments, “He doesn’t wanna be known as a she, he said in one of his videos.” Literally like three years ago I said in one of my videos. Because I just hadn’t grown, I hadn’t developed. I wasn’t really educated at all in what was really going on in my head, what was out there, what was possible in the world. So I think that in that time obviously I was being truthful. I never really lied to you guys about anything going on with me. I just don’t identify as that anymore. [...] I wouldn’t say that it’s necessarily a decision I made. I think that I have been trans my entire life, I really do. I guess it was easier to be gay.

Similarly, Vu (2011) claims in her trans coming out video that she identified as gay because it was easier. However, Vu specifies that identifying as gay was easier particularly in terms of dating:

I see myself as a girl inside. I was born physically male, but I am 100 percent female on the inside. [...] I have questions with people asking me, like, “Oh you made a coming out video and you said you were gay, now you’re saying you’re transgendered. What are you talking about? You’re confusing me.” Well let me tell you something. Back then I wasn’t really educated and I just, I thought it would be too much information, too much to tell people, “Hey, I’m transgendered.” People are gonna be really confused and won’t know what transgendered people are. Like, what am I supposed to do? Go up to a gay person and be like, “Hi, I’m transgendered, would you date me?” Or do I go to a straight guy and be like, “Hi, I’m transgendered, would you wanna date me?” They’re all gonna look at me and go like, “You’re crazy.” Like, “Get out of here,” right? So calling myself gay is what I could have done to get someone to meet. Do you know what I mean? I felt like, if I was telling people I was gay I would get someone to love. And I did. But you know what, I’m at a point in my life where I just want to be me.

Of course, while these responses explain why Vu and Lazzarato resisted accepting and publicly announcing their transgender identity, they do not actually go into how they knew they

were transwomen rather than effeminate gay men. Many trans YouTubers who tackle the question of how they knew they were trans describe their masculine or feminine expression as a strong indicator. For instance, in “How You Know You Are Transgender??” MTF YouTuber Jamie Mackenzie (2014) recalls that when she was going back and forth as to whether she was trans, a major step towards realizing her identity was growing out her hair and gathering the courage to buy women’s foundation. FTM vlogger Ty Turner’s video “How To Tell if You Are Transgender” (2015a) advises questioning viewers to “dress like a guy for a month or dress like a girl for a month and see how that feels to you.” In “Should I Transition? 7 Thought Experiments to Help Figure it Out,” MTF vlogger Kristin (2012) suggests eliminating external judgements from the equation by imagining you were stranded alone on a desert island and men’s and women’s clothing washed up on shore; which would you wear? Often in videos recounting trans self-discovery, these signs of feminine or masculine expression go hand in hand with the realization of a (pre-transition) homosexual orientation. For example, FTM vlogger Alan (2014) recalls,

Realizing that I’m trans has required peeling back many layers. When I was in high school I had to peel back the layer of fear of being mistaken for a boy. [...] So in high school I was like, you know, I wanna wear my plaid flannel shirt today and I’m gonna do it. So that was one layer. Then later I was like, I wanna wear men’s jeans, yeah I’ll do that. There’s another layer coming off. Then, oh, it’s okay to think that girls are pretty, that doesn’t mean I’m gay (even though it really did). Then another layer was oh, I’m attracted to girls, that’s okay. Then okay, I can have really short hair that looks like a men’s haircut, that’s okay. There’s another layer. And that was over many years. That was how I did it.

As Lazzarato’s “Too Gay?” video performance in sparkly pink heels acknowledges, gender expression that does not match the gender you were assigned at birth is often interpreted as an expression of homosexual orientation. For Lazzarato and Vu, who each wore women’s clothing, make-up and

hairstyles while still explicitly insisting on a male identity, their feminine expression was presented as a part of their flamboyantly gay YouTube personas. And as Lazzarato herself made clear, to treat her sexual orientation and feminine expression as cause to question her male gender wacan be seen as a close-minded, essentialist view of gender. This naturally leaves many viewers wondering, how then did you know you were trans? While some previously gay-identified trans YouTubers, including Lazzarato and Vu, make vague reference to education and soul searching, a few attempt to define for viewers in greater depth how they moved from identifying as a cisgendered homosexual to a transgendered heterosexual.

One such vlogger is Aydian Dowling, who claims he was always known as a tomboy while growing up and describes his teenage identity as that of a “butch” or “dikey” lesbian. In “I Didn’t Know I Was Trans!” Aydian (2013) tells viewers that even though he grew up in a home where there was no pressure to be girly and that he and his family were accepting of his masculine lesbian identity, he realized what was missing once he finally learned about transgenderism at the age of twenty-two, through a YouTube FTM transition video:

I didn’t know. I don’t think you do know. And then all of a sudden, something clicks. That’s what happened to me. Something clicked, and something inside of me said, “That’s it. That guy on there. You’re gonna be that guy.” [...] It wasn’t hard for me once I figured it out. I was very depressed throughout middle school and high school and I didn’t know why. I was very depressed. I used to cut myself as self-torture or whatever. I did that for a lot of years. I had friends and I had a family, but I wasn’t happy with myself and so I took it out on everything else that was around me. That’s when I did my most thinking and I figured out I was gay, and then I was like, okay that’s cool. And then I was okay with myself being more of the masculine and that was cool, but I just never felt complete. And once I discovered what trans was I felt that little gap close.

Alan, who identified for many years as a butch lesbian before coming to the realization that he was trans at the age of thirty-one, describes how he actually never felt comfortable with his lesbian identity, to the extent that he did not even recognize himself as a lesbian until late college. He believes that his unrecognized transgenderism is the reason he had trouble recognizing his attraction to women:

[In high school] I would think about that. I was like, am I gay? And I would picture and try to feel what it would be like to be with a girl. And thinking of myself as a girl with a girl didn't do anything for me at that time, it didn't feel like much of anything. Like when I would envision that, I was like, eh, that doesn't feel satisfying. What sounds satisfying to me is, you know, a guy, like a strong guy, like with strong shoulders, a tall guy with big shoulders – that's fitting. That's gotta be in there somewhere. So I was like, well, I guess I'm not a lesbian. Although of course later I realized that the reason I hadn't been on dates with guys is that I was not attracted to guys and that I was really attracted to women. So looking back on that from my current perspective I'm like, well, I feel like maybe the reason it took me a long time to realize I like girls and why it felt right to have a big strong guy with broad shoulders is that I am actually largely straight, but a straight guy, and the guy that I was envisioning, maybe that is me.

That change in orientation label on relationships—from homosexual relationships to heterosexual relationships—is often a major point in trans YouTubers' gender affirmation. Although a trans individual's potential shift in orientation label – from homosexual to heterosexual or vice versa – merely signifies their change in gender identity, the change in orientation of their partner brings in the complicated relationship between sexual orientation, gender, and the body. Among trans vloggers, dating advice and partner appearances are a popular trend. In part, this comes from the general YouTube vlogging culture, where sharing personal information like relationship status is expected, Q&As that include relationship questions are standard, and where some of the most popular viral YouTube tags feature the creator's significant other, such as the “Boyfriend does my Makeup” tag. Yet trans YouTubers face significantly more curiosity about their sex and dating life as cis viewers wonder about the mechanics of sex and dynamics of sexual orientation involved in trans people's relationships and trans viewers share young Julie Vu's concern about whether they will be able to have a fulfilling love life once they come out. For YouTubers like Ty Turner, bringing on a heterosexual partner who can attest to the normalcy and genuine sexual attraction in their relationship is a way to add to the legitimacy of one's gender identity and a way to show life as a transgender person in a positive light.

Ty Turner started his channel in 2008 and posted his trans “Coming Out” video in October of 2013. Since then, he has gained notoriety for his videos documenting his transition and offering information on trans issues. His most popular video, “Female to Male Transition – 1 Year on Testosterone” (2015b) has over 1.9 million views, and he has over 130,000 subscribers as of April 2016. He began dating his girlfriend Christy Sanchez in June 2014, at which point she began appearing in his videos and skits. Their relationship has been the main topic of a number of videos, including what it was like moving in together, how Turner proposed, why they broke up and, in his most recent video, the nature of their relationship now that they are back together. A few months into their relationship, Turner posted “by popular request” the video “Dating a Transguy (ft. My Girlfriend),” in which Turner (2014) and Sanchez sit side by side answering questions from viewers about their relationship. The two demonstrate a glowing enthusiasm for one another and excitement about their new relationship. They giggle at the questions throughout and show physical affection, with Turner wrapping his arms around Sanchez and kissing her temple, burying his face in the crook of her neck each time he laughs, and Sanchez playfully lying down on top of him. One topic of curiosity is Sanchez’s sexual orientation. Viewers ask if she is straight—“yes”—and whether she has ever dated a girl—“no.” Turner then adds,

One thing that’s really awesome about Christy is that since the first time we even talked after me coming out, even before we were dating or anything, she always used the right pronoun, she always used my male name and she always – you know, I felt like, and I continue to feel like she sees me completely as a guy – but she’s always been really respectful about that. I don’t know. And you’re not weird, like, touching my chest. Like you don’t avoid that or something, and that’s something that’s happened that I’ve noticed before. I feel like the way you are with me is not a way you would be with a girl, and so I can tell that you really think of me as a guy, so I really appreciate that.

Turner’s interjection emphasizes that Sanchez’s status as a heterosexual woman who only dates men is part of the confirmation that she sees him as a guy. It is validating for him personally, and in relating this dynamic to viewers, serves to further legitimate his gender as male in the eyes of the public. This same sentiment is expressed in other trans relationship Q & As, such as FTM vlogger Augustus Alexander’s

(2015) video, also titled “Dating a Transguy (ft. My Girlfriend).” Alexander defines himself and his girlfriend as “a straight couple” and says he does not think he would ever date a lesbian, explaining, “I always think if I date someone who’s a lesbian they’re gonna kinda see me as a girl, you know what I mean? Whereas a girl who’s straight, you know, she’s gonna see me more as a guy.”

However, trans experiences are of course diverse, and not all transmen share Alexander’s opinion. FTM vlogger Noah Kuenzli has included his lesbian girlfriend in videos throughout his transition. Kuenzli started his channel in July of 2014 to document his transition and has over 3,700 subscribers as of April 2016. His third video, three days after coming out as trans, is “Telling my girlfriend I’m transgender,” in which Kuenzli (2014) interviews his girlfriend Brittany about her feelings since learning his gender identity. Brittany claims that while unexpected, the news wasn’t unbelievable:

Kuenzli: I thought you were gonna break up with me. I thought you were gonna be like, “I’m a lesbian. I do not date boys.”

Brittany: Yeah, well I mean it is kinda funny, because I am a lesbian. And I don’t date boys.

Kuenzli: And I’m gonna get hairy and get big muscles.

Brittany: Yeah. But you’ll be sexy.

Kuenzli: And have a deep manly voice. *Like this.*

Brittany: [*laughs*] Yeah. I hope so.

Kuenzli’s videos mostly consist of updates on his progress on testosterone, occasionally with his girlfriend providing extra commentary by his side. But a number of videos also give updates on their life as a couple, including trying to have a baby, Brittany’s pregnancy and her miscarriage. The pair go more in depth about their sexuality in relation to Kuenzli’s transition in a video titled, “Lesbians Dating Transmen” (2015). At the time of the video, Kuenzli was about six months on testosterone. Sitting beside each other, they explore the complicated nature of attraction and identity. For starters, Kuenzli makes it clear that “being with a woman who so strongly identifies as a lesbian doesn’t make me feel any less of a man.” Still, he doesn’t think her orientation is by any means irrelevant, either. Although he was initially convinced that she would break up with him due to her sexual orientation, he now contemplates whether lesbians in general

are better suited to date transmen who do not undergo genital reassignment surgery: “What’s in my pants, I think, would probably make it harder for a straight woman to be with a transman.” Yet Brittany counters that, because she is lesbian, they never would have dated had they met post transition. Not only was she not interested in men, but she even preferred feminine women and “had never even dated anyone butch or dikey or anything like that.” She explains,

It’s silly because obviously when we first met you were a woman, and I fell in love with you like that. If you were a guy then I would have had no interest at all. Because that’s gay nature. You can’t be somebody that’s gay and actively want to date somebody who is the opposite sex. Like, that’s not being gay, that’s just being bi or sexually fluid or whatever. If you’re somebody that is gay then you are obviously attracted to the same sex, which is why I pursued you. That’s why I wanted to be with you and fell in love with you and stuff. If you would’ve been a man from the beginning I wouldn’t have been interested at all. That’s not being gay at all.

When Kuenzli asks if dating a man now lessens her lesbian identity, Brittany answers that it does not because if the two of them were to ever break up, she would still only be interested in other women.³ Kuenzli is an exception, because he remains the same person she fell in love with, adding,

It’s strange because obviously I identify as a lesbian, but at the same time I’m not trying to be with other women. But I’m not trying to be with other men either. Like, I’m just trying to be with you. So I don’t think it really matters if I identify as a lesbian. I think if anything I identify as like, a you-sexual. I just want you.

This concept of a “you-sexual” is echoed in yet another trans relationship Q & A. Saren Grey is an FTM vlogger who has been making videos since 2012. Like Kuenzli, Grey started his channel to document his transition and has included his partner Taylor in videos since the beginning. When they reach the sexual orientation question in their relationship Q & A, Grey (2015) groans, “I hate this question. This is making me feel like another species.” His partner Taylor agrees, but pushes through: “Honestly, if I had to put a

³ For more information on how lesbians negotiate their sexual identity, desire and practices in relationships with transitioning transmen, see Nicola R. Brown’s studies: “I’m in Transition Too: Sexual Identity Renegotiation in Sexual-Minority Women’s Relationships with Transsexual Men,” *International Journal of Sexual Health*, 21:1(2009), and “The Sexual Relationships of Sexual-Minority Women Partnered with Trans Men: A Qualitative Study,” *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 39:2(2010).

label on it, which I hate putting a label on it because it's just stupid, it would be pansexual. Actually fuck that, I'm Seran sexual because I only love Seran and only look at Seran and I only want to fuck Seran." While Taylor's answer that she is Seran-sexual is playful, it does get to the heart of a popular sentiment in trans vloggers' and their partners' responses to the sexual orientation question: the relationship is about the people themselves, not their gender or sexual orientation. As Brittany sums up in their "Lesbians Dating Transmen" video, "You should date who you love. I don't see why any of it matters."

At times, this insistence that gender and orientation don't matter in the relationship can seem contradictory, as when Julie Vu, in a post transition video, answers the question about her and her boyfriend's sexual orientation. In this video, titled "Is My Boyfriend Gay?," Vu (2013) frames recognition of her relationship as heterosexual as essential to respecting her gender identity while simultaneously suggesting that a moral person is more concerned with the person than gender, sex, or orientation. She acknowledges from the start how transgenderism complicates standard orientation labels, saying that "the rainbow of sexual orientation...is confusing as frick" and "no one is 100% any single color." To Vu, valuing the person over the body in matters of love and attraction is a moral issue, a product of open-mindedness: "This is the reason why I love my boyfriend and I find him so rare. He is that type of guy that's so open-minded. He's the type of person that loves you for who you are. It doesn't matter what I have between my legs—a vagina, a penis or a black hole." Yet in answering the next question she is frequently asked by male viewers—whether being attracted to her makes them gay—she acknowledges both the public body and the genitalia as significant in physical attraction and orientation:

Another question that I get a lot is, "I'm a straight male and I'm attracted to you. Does that make me gay?" I don't think that makes you gay. If I'm walking down the street and you see me and you think I'm attractive, you only see me, you don't see what I have going on down there. [...] If you're gay and you're watching this, would you be attracted to me? Probably not, because hopefully I don't look like a man and gay people like men. Do I look like a man?

In this answer, it is not merely that Vu identifies as a woman, but that she *looks* like a woman. She successfully passes as a woman in appearance and voice, and thus straight men have no reason to question

their sexual orientation when they find themselves attracted to her. This is especially true since viewers cannot see her “down there.” Additionally, despite her insistence that an open-minded person “loves you for who you are,” it is important to Vu that her viewers understand that her boyfriend is physically attracted to her *as a woman*:

Another thing: a lot of people think I like gay people. Let’s be clear. I’m a heterosexual female, okay? I like straight men. I see myself as a straight woman. [...] I like gay people, but I’m not attracted to my gay friends, you know? I like my macho hairy men. I am a heterosexual woman that is in love with my heterosexual boyfriend.

Overall, Vu paints a scale of male heterosexuality that, at its farthest end, may factor genitalia into attraction, but in which the outward feminine appearance is much more significant, and the inner person trumps all. This is not wholly different from Brittany’s assessment, in which her boyfriend’s outward appearance as a man—regardless of his female genitalia-- would be enough to rule him out as a romantic and sexual interest had she not already fallen in love with him as a person. While these explanations shed some light on how ambiguous or changing trans bodies can be reconciled with clearly defined heterosexual or homosexual orientations, they are ultimately the stories of a few individuals and do not represent the range of sexual negotiations in trans relationships.

A far simpler response can be found in Taylor’s initial answer to the orientation question: pansexual. Pansexuality is sexual attraction toward people of any sex or gender identity. Unlike bisexuality, pansexuality includes attraction towards people who do not fit into the gender binary. For Taylor, who has been dating Grey since before his transition, this identity makes it easy to understand her physical and emotional attraction to Grey as a woman, as a man, and as a gender ambiguous body over the course of transition.

Sexual orientation, however, is not the only the only sexual topic of curiosity among viewers. For those with body dysphoria who may be uncomfortable sharing their body with a partner and for those considering or simply curious about genital reassignment surgery, the mechanics of sex can be an important question. This question pries into a much more traditionally private sphere of life than relationship status

and for many YouTubers is too personal to discuss. Some trans YouTubers, including Gigi Gorgeous, who are otherwise open about all aspects of their physical and emotional changes during transition, choose not to share even whether they opt for genital reassignment surgery, let alone its implications for their sex life. Grey, who has stated that he has not had genital reassignment surgery (2015b), addresses this question with Taylor in their Q & A. Grey acknowledges the sincerity of the question, admitting, “Honestly, I hate this question, but people are genuinely curious.” Taylor answers that they have sex “like a cis couple,” and uses her hands to mime a penis penetrating a vagina as she says, “This goes into this, and then you go like this.” Of course, this directly avoids the implied question of how they have sex *given that Grey has not had bottom surgery*, and their joking manner leaves it unclear to what extent Taylor’s response is true. Despite Grey’s sympathy for the sincerity of the question, the couple ultimately provide a non-answer and choose to keep the details of their physical life private. However, Grey does acknowledge that body dysphoria has created challenges in his sex life when they reach the question, “What is your favorite thing to do sexually.” Grey tells viewers, “I love sex with her. And I used to hate sex. I used to hate being touched, and whenever I got with anybody it would be like the known thing, don’t touch me. [...] This is the first physical interaction with a girl where I’ve actually been comfortable being touched. So really I’m learning about it still.”

Another trans couple who go into detail about their sex life are FTM vlogger Alex Bertie and his boyfriend, FTM vlogger Jake Edwards. The two UK teenagers having been dating and vlogging since before either began transitioning, and are now vlogging their transitions together. They have a number of relationship-focused videos, such as “Q & A with the Bae” and “Couple Facts.” Bertie has been vlogging since March 28, 2010 and has over 170,000 subscribers. Edwards has been vlogging since January of 2013 and has over 70,000 subscribers. They are frequently physically affectionate on camera, including extended kissing, and have a reputation among their fans as a sexy couple. Bertie (2014) and Edwards choose to delve into the practical issues of having sex with body dysphoria in their video, “TRANSGENDER INTIMACY.” They begin by stating that they are both pansexual. Alex introduces the central issue of the video as follows:

We have a lot of body dysphoria, so there are some parts of our bodies like our chest and our junk that we don't really like that much. And you know it's horrible if you don't really like something about yourself and you're trying to get intimate with another person because they're gonna touch you and they're gonna see things. So you need to have some way of going around those or overcoming those.

They then go into some of the tactics they use when having sex with each other. These include making clear boundaries before you begin touching, using male or gender neutral terminology like “dick,” “junk,” and “chest,” wearing a binder and/or a loose fitting shirt and keeping the lights off. Like Grey, they assure their viewers that it can improve over time and state that they are now comfortable having sex with the lights on and their shirts off.

Vu is another trans vlogger who advises viewers on the practical mechanics of trans sex and dating. An MTF transsexual, Vu is extremely open and explicit about her sex life in light of her genital reassignment surgery. She describes the surgery in detail and shows viewers her variously sized dilators as she describes the healing process post-surgery. Vu even records herself on the bed, the camera showing her waist up, as she puts in the largest dilator for the first time, demonstrating for viewers that it is painful but survivable, and giving advice such as which lube to buy (2014a). Vu realizes that her many videos on her sex life may be controversial, but argues for their value. The day she lost her “vaginal virginity,” Vu posted a video on the experience in which she explained,

Mom and Dad, I know you're watching this, but I have to make this video for educational purposes because there is no other video on YouTube that talks about post-op sex. [...] I want to talk about something important that a lot of people are wondering about. There are a lot of boyfriends out there who want to know. There are people going through transition who want to know about this topic. It's a very real topic and I feel like it shouldn't be so taboo anymore. [...] Our teachers are teaching about sex in general in school, so I don't see why I can't talk about sex as a post-op transgender woman (2014b).

Vu's videos on sex explain what orgasm feels like post-op (“the same, only nothing comes out”), how pleasurable or painful sex can be at various stages, how she bled the first few times post-op, what positions can be helpful to begin with, how it feels to use a vibrator, and much more.

She remains consistently optimistic and encouraging in all videos, only sharing fears, concerns, or bouts of depression after they have been allayed. She acknowledges aesthetics as an important aspect to many considering surgery, and shows pictures of herself in a bikini, slightly pulling down the bikini bottoms to show her post-surgery scars (2015b). She also makes a video with her gay YouTube celebrity friend, Davey Wavey, in which she undresses off camera and films his (positive) reaction to and description of her body, including her scars (2015c). Of course, it is important to again note that Vu is a conventionally very beautiful and successfully passing transwoman having heterosexual sex. It is possible that her beauty, orientation and passing status afford her the privilege of being more accepted and comfortable in sharing her body and sex life with the public.

Overall, the variety of relationships, orientations and sexual experiences shared by trans YouTubers depicts a diverse but optimistic image of transgender sexuality. While the specific negotiations are individual, they show that it is possible to maintain fulfilling romantic relationships and sex lives pre-, mid-, and post-transition, even sometimes with one committed partner throughout. In sharing these experiences, they ameliorate some common concerns among trans viewers and their partners about how their unconventional bodies and identities may fare in the dating world. They also provide authentic accounts of trans experience in relation to an aspect of identity—sexual orientation—that has historically been used to question the reality of transgender identity. By going into detail about their experience of sexual and gender identity and how the two work in tandem, these vloggers effectively help clear confusions and satisfy curiosities regarding the complicated topic of transgender sexuality.

CONCLUSION

Following the sexual revolution and civil rights movements of the twentieth century, today's youth are growing up amidst a queer sex positive movement that embraces openness, instability and diversity. Sexist, racist, homophobic and transphobic attitudes are alive and well,

along with general proscriptions on number of sexual partners and relationship dynamics. Yet, increasingly, the tone of sexual health advocacy is leaning towards an ideology that privileges freedom of the unique individual. Finding what works for you and respecting what works for others is the gold standard of sex positivism, curbed only by an insistence on safety and consent. In the pursuit of self-actualization, labels have both multiplied and lost significance as sexual liberals seek to acknowledge the wide range of gender identities, sexual orientations and relationship configurations without limiting them to existing definitions.

As a politically controversial ideology, queer sex positivism has yet to gain footing in formal sex education programs. Instead, youth access transgressive understandings of sexuality online, sharing and debating with one another through social media. YouTube vlogging is uniquely suited to queer sex positive education in how it defies stigma and enables nuance. Unlike textual blogging, video blogs involve an unusual level of exposure for the vlogger, who is both seen and heard. By revealing information about their sexuality in public videos, vloggers promote a culture of shamelessness, framing a positive, celebratory approach to sex as essential to sexual health. Through vlogger cross-collaborations and the interactive vlogger-subscriber relationship, YouTube fosters community and dialogue. Sexual minorities who struggle for visibility in mainstream media have formed a network of support on YouTube, where anyone with an internet connection can access the conversation. Within these communities, one can find questions and answers to minority issues such as transgender sexual orientation. The depth of personal sharing that takes place over months and years of life-streaming and across the vast number of YouTube channels allows for an complex vision of sexuality, where queer sexuality is documented in real time.

Most importantly, YouTube vlogging combines sexual health advocacy with entertainment. Vloggers aim to create engaging, often humorous videos, communicating their sexual health messages in a manner that keeps viewers coming back weekly. They become micro-celebrities, with fans invested in and inspired by the lives these vloggers share online. Ultimately, queer sex positive vlogging folds meaningful education into popular entertainment, effectively proliferating sexual health information.

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