# CULTURES OF SEX ADVICE: EXAMINING TIKTOK COMMUNITIES AROUND SEXUAL HEALTH IN THE US

Annika Pinch
Northwestern University

Facundo Suenzo
Northwestern University

## Introduction/Background

The relationship between media and sexuality has undergone a significant transformation in the context of modernity, influencing societal perspectives on love, relationships, and pleasure (Bauman, 2013; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2018; Giddens, 2013). This study investigates the evolving landscape of sexual health in the digital age, specifically focusing on how sexuality experts convey advice on online platforms and the subsequent interactions and perceptions of audiences. Our research builds upon Steven Epstein's (2022) thesis on the diversification of sexual health expertise, where the "blossoming of expertise constitutes a kind of democratization of knowledge and advice-giving, while also raising perplexing questions about who should be trusted and why" (p.19). To explore this tension, we also draw from Science and Technology Studies' literature on knowledge, credibility, and trust (Collins, 1981; Epstein, 1995; Jasanoff, 2004; Latour, 1987; Shapin, 1994). In the context of the ever-expanding digital realm, understanding these dynamics is crucial for comprehending the impact of technology on sexuality.

While the relationship between sex advice, health, and media is not new (Attwood, 2017; Barker et al., 2018; Bashford & Strange, 2004), the prevalence of online technologies, particularly social media platforms, has transformed the way individuals seek and receive advice on sexuality. The arrival of the Internet and its increasing accessibility has impacted the nature of mediated sex advice (Attwood et al., 2015). Indeed, a new strand of scholarship seeks to explain how advice and expertise are being formed and transmitted in digital spaces (Avella, 2023; Hendry et al., 2022; Maddox, 2023; Southerton, 2021; Stein et al., 2022). As Barker and colleagues (2018) suggest, one of the central differences with previous mediated forms of sex advice is

the changing status and relationship between advice-givers and audiences. However, little is known about how audiences engage with sexual advice, with some exceptions (Yeo & Chu, 2017). We thus focus on audiences' multiple ways of knowing, participating, and challenging conventional authority, drawing from Albury and Hendry's (2023) framework, who privilege ritualistic aspects of communication as opposed to a transmission view of communication.

## Research Questions

This study investigates how sexuality experts communicate sexual advice on online platforms and how audiences interact with and perceive these experts. Our study aligns with this year's conference theme – examining the emergence and continuation of industries like sexual health education – highlighting the dynamics that arise within online spaces. We thus propose the following research questions:

RQ1: How do sexuality experts build credibility amongst their audience?
RQ2: What are the ways in which audiences engage with this content and evaluate creators' expertise and credibility?

## Methods

To answer these questions, we use TikTok as our site of analysis because of the potential for creators to reach diverse and sizable audiences, aided by TikTok's unique affordances (Miltsov, 2022; Schellewald, 2021). Analyzing TikTok videos is still an evolving methodology, and we thus followed guidelines and advice from emerging research (Zhao, 2024). For the first phase of our project, we selected 20 sex experts, whose videos consistently garnered over 100,000 views each, compiling each expert's fifteen most viewed videos (n=300). These experts were chosen by reading articles that recommended the top sex experts to follow (Inks, 2022) and searching keywords on TikTok such as 'Sex Expert' or 'Sex Therapist'. The chosen videos were in English, publicly accessible, and attributed to creators located in the United States, as indicated by profile information.

We used a thematic analysis approach - watching videos, discussing emerging themes and grouping them thematically. During this phase, we noticed creators actively engaged within comment sections. To capture these interactions, we made a subsample of each expert's top five videos, including their top five comments in our analysis (n=500). We similarly read through these comments and created themes.

For the second phase of the project, we will conduct in-depth online interviews with individuals who regularly contribute to sex education content on TikTok (n=15). We will prioritize participants with a substantial number of followers and engagement rates, ensuring their influence within the platform's community. All participants will be over 18 and United States residents. The interviews will delve into how experts conceptualize sexual health, build credibility, and understand their audience, among other themes.

**Preliminary Results**

Below, we present preliminary results, and by the conference date, we anticipate incorporating our interview findings.

*Building and Maintaining Credibility*

We found that an important part of building and maintaining credibility happened beyond the TikTok videos themselves. Creators' ability to engage in relational labor (Baym, 2018), often important for "maintaining an audience and earning money" (Bonifacio et al., 2021; p. 2686), was vital in this process, especially in instances where their expertise was questioned.

Creators employed various strategies when questioned, including responding to comments, crafting replies to videos, and utilizing humor to connect with users. In one case, a user expressed disagreement with a creator, to which the creator responded, "I said what I said but I said it with <3", attaching a reply video which used humor and incorporated pop culture references, before gradually transitioning into a more serious response. This nuanced handling of comments revealed a delicate balance creators needed to maintain - being both authoritative while acknowledging the diverse experiences and opinions of their users so as not to alienate them.

Our observations extended beyond creators themselves, revealing instances where fellow audience members played a role in validating creators' expertise. Meisner (2023) explored the ways in which creators and audiences rely on each other, especially when facing hostility. Building on this, we saw collective strategies emerge when creators' expertise was challenged. In one instance, a user skeptically questioned the creator ("How would you know?") with another user replying, "She is a doctor." In a different case, a user affirmed the creator's expertise by acknowledging, "Being a kink educator must be exhausting with all the uneducated people on this app." Both creators and audiences actively contributed to the establishment and reinforcement of expertise.

*Cultures of Advice*

Comment sections emerged as dynamic spaces for discourse. We found that sexual health advice was not solely coming from creators, but also from those engaging in comments, fostering a culture of advice related to the video's theme. One user shared their advice on a video about first-time sexual experiences, stating, "pro tip: be loose and laugh off embarrassing moments (bc they WILL happen)..." in which other users liked and responded. The comment sections turned into spaces of community building, where people shared experiences, found validation, and tagged friends and partners. Indeed, as Albury and Hendry (2023) have argued, "media is not about the transmission of information – it is about building and sustaining culture" (p. 639).

Creators have long been attuned to audience tastes (Duffy et al., 2021), and we similarly saw the importance of being flexible and creating videos based on what audiences wanted to engage with. One creator made a video addressing colorism in sex and relationships to which a user asked, "Are [white] people able to be colorist?"

The creator then focused their next video on this question. The audience actively influenced the content landscape, challenging the conventional top-down hierarchy in sexual education where expertise is unilaterally shared. The observed cultures of advice surrounding sexual health thereby also emphasizes the necessity for advice that reflects diverse experiences and comes from various voices.

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