"IT FEELS INCONGRUENT TO TALK ABOUT REDUCING SHAME WHEN I HAVE TO SPELL 'S-E-G-G-S' ON TIKTOK": NAVIGATING PLATFORM MODERATION AS SEX EDUCATION CREATORS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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Introduction/Background

Sex education in the U.S. has long been contentious, shaped by shifting public health priorities, political agendas, and cultural debates. With no federal mandate, states adopt widely varying curricula, often scaling back content on LGBTQ+ and other marginalized communities (Fingerhut, 2023; Hubbard, 2021). As younger cohorts like Gen Z and Gen Alpha increasingly turn to TikTok—sometimes over Google—for information (Delouya, 2024), social media has emerged as a critical space for accessing sexual education. While these platforms offer opportunities to diversify knowledge and fill educational gaps, the creators who produce this content face severe content restrictions (Garwood-Cross et al., 2024; Gillespie, 2022; Williams, 2023). This is partly due to FOSTA-SESTA, a 2018 law aimed at curbing sex trafficking but with sweeping unintended consequences for sexual expression, sex work, and online education (Bronstein, 2021; Mia, 2020).

While much research explores how platform moderation impacts sexual expression and sex work (Are, 2022; Davisson & Alati, 2024; Easterbrook-Smith, 2022; Stegman et al., 2024), less attention is given to its effects on sex education creators. This gap limits understanding of how moderation shapes access to sex education, potentially influencing public knowledge and health outcomes. One notable exception is Williams' (2023) autoethnographic study of sex education moderation practices on Instagram and Facebook in Australia, which highlights the significant resources and expertise required to navigate Meta's opaque and conservative moderation policies. Garwood-Cross and colleagues (2024) investigate sexual education efforts on YouTube and discuss how algorithms conflate sex edutainment with sexual content, restricting monetization. Building on this work, we examine TikTok and Instagram in the U.S., revealing how moderation creates new tensions for sex education creators.

Methods

We conducted in-depth interviews with 15 sex education professionals between June and November 2024, identified through articles recommending top sex education professionals to follow on social media (Inks, 2022) and TikTok keyword searches. Recruitment involved direct outreach on TikTok, Instagram, and email, followed by snowball sampling. Eligible participants were professionals who self-identified as therapists, psychologists, sexologists, coaches, doctors, or experts in sex and relationships, all aged 18 or older. This study was approved by the authors' University Institutional Review Board. Each participant received a $30 gift card as compensation. Interviews were conducted in English, lasted approximately one hour, and were fully recorded for transcription and analysis. We employed both deductive and inductive coding (Gerson & Damaske, 2020), iteratively refining our coding framework to ensure analytical rigor and validity (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009).

Findings

Algospeak, Stigma, and Credibility

While social media can be considered a space to democratize sex education (Manduley et al., 2018), creators encounter significant barriers. To navigate content moderation, creators employed linguistic strategies like misspelling words, avoiding certain terms altogether, or using code words to evade restrictions. This aligns with what Steen et al. (2023) refer to as algospeak—strategies to prevent the consequences of content moderation. While algospeak enables creators to avoid moderation that would limit their capacity to communicate with their audience, our findings show how it introduces further tensions, particularly as sex education creators work to make taboo or stigmatized topics speakable. Specifically, using algospeak 1) can perpetuate shame and stigma around sex and 2) can undermine their credibility as sex education professionals.

Shame and Stigma around Sex

Sex education creator, Isabella, is motivated by a desire to reduce stigma and promote open, informed discussions about sexuality. She shared:
    In America, we have just absolutely rubbish sex education... It's really

important for people to have access to free information that can help them contextualize and normalize their own fantasies, their own sexual behavior, their own interests, and reduce shame and stigma.

However, the need to circumvent moderation practices directly undermines these efforts. Isabella explained:

I'm frequently shadowbanned and my accounts are suppressed, which makes it very difficult to create content with the integrity that I'd like to maintain. It feels very incongruent to be talking about reducing shame around sex, and I have to spell the word sex, S-E-G-G-S, because there's so much censorship on TikTok, there's so much sex negativity and public shame around this word.

As another creator, Luna, summed up: "These types of restrictions are just perpetuating the taboo and the stigma around sex and pleasure."

Credibility as Sex Education Professionals

Strategies to get around moderation can also undermine creators' credibility as sex education professionals. Anvi described the response she received in saying 'seggs' in her content:

We started getting a lot of pushback... People would comment, 'You want to talk about sex, but you don't even know how to spell it correctly.' Or like you're ashamed to even say it out on camera. For about two, three months, I used to respond to every comment and explain why I had done it.

This further reveals the ongoing and additional labor creators must undertake to maintain their credibility. Explaining their choices to an audience extends Kojah et al.'s (2024) findings on the burdens creators face in avoiding shadowbanning. Creators must not only adapt their content but also continuously justify their decisions to their followers to maintain authority and integrity in their work. Indeed, creators have long faced precarious work (Christin & Lu, 2024; Duffy et al., 2021; Glatt, 2022; Neff et al., 2005), where they must not only produce content but also manage the socio-technical constraints of platforms. While strategies such as algospeak offer agency for creators to navigate restrictions, it simultaneously generates further tensions, forcing them into a continuous cycle of adaptation and justification.

Platform Priorities and Inconsistent Moderation

While creators were forced to employ various tactics that introduced new tensions, they expressed broader frustrations with the evident priorities embedded in moderation practices. Rosalie highlighted:

This algorithm robot thing can't find posts with guns and pills, but if someone shows a side boob, their page gets flagged. It can find that. It is BS. It's just patriarchy and sex negativity. It's just priorities. What are they prioritizing? This person who's literally making a living on creating sex education content keeps having their page flagged.

These priorities manifested in gendered and racialized ways, as Duffy & Mesiner (2023) have discussed in relation to algorithmic invisibility for marginalized communities. Clara shared: "The reality is…I look at sexuality and relationships through a social justice lens. Nothing about TikTok wants to do that…anything within a context of race or gender concerns, I get a community violation."

At the same time, the hate and harassment comments creators received was often left unmoderated. Clara recounted, "I've gotten, 'You should walk in front of a bus,' when I would talk about Asian hate." Isabella described "the rape threats and the death threats and the doxing" she regularly received. While creators' content faces strict moderation, the hateful and violent messages targeting them often go unchecked. This highlights a troubling observation where platforms are perceived to police sex education content more harshly than the abuse aimed at silencing it.

Ultimately, this paper examines how ruptures in platform governance are experienced by creators and actively produce new fractures, reinforcing and reshaping the dynamics of knowledge and power online.

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