**Sexuality Online: YouTubers as Informal Educators in the Information Age**

**Summary (200 word limit):**

In recent decades, the internet has flourished as a primary source of sex eduation (SexEd) for youth and has platformed YouTubers as key social influencers that shape youngsters’ views and identities. Given their immense popularity and emergence as entrepreneurial and informal educators, the study aims to profile social-influencers catering to youth, uncovering their worldviews, unveil the ways SexEd YouTubers foster professionalism, and investigate sexuality socialization in the information age. Accordingly, I ask how YouTubers construct their roles as SexEd professionals? Framed through the lens of the sociology of professionalism, the study will qualitatively investigate 25-popular YouTube channels, analyze their audio-visual content and pedagogic delivery strategies, as well as conduct in-depth interviews with their creators-presenters. Thus, the study will illuminate the field of sexuality and identity formation, with special attention to social influencers which have emerged as a legitimate source of information that breach traditional forms of learning on sexuality. Rather than viewing SexEd YouTubers as deviant providers of (mis)information and lowbrow entertainment, the study will elucidate their ideological missions, actions and commitments to their young publics. Implications for SexEd initiatives (governmental or NGO) and curricula design for policymakers and practitioners will be provided.

# **Narrative (1800 words):**

# **Project Description**

In recent decades, the mediatization of sex-education (SexEd) has perturbed the discourse on sexuality, particularly regarding youth socialization. In the past, the family, peer group, and formal education were the main sources of youngsters’ sexual literacy. Since the advent of the internet, pornography and sporadic websites have become popular sources for youth’s autonomous learning (Jones & Biddelcom, 2011). This development challenges boundaries and taboos, power/knowledge relations between adults and youth, sparks communities of knowledge on gender diversity, and introduces new players who transmit knowledge about sexuality (Kaastan, 2022).

Out of the wide range of websites, apps and games focusing on sexuality, YouTube channels play a preponderant role. YouTubers receive millions of views and discuss issues about love, sexuality, sexual-maturation, contraception, gender, online privacy, maintaining personal space, and relationships. However, while the popularity of YouTubers surge, little is known about the motivations, ideologies and perceptions that underpin their activities. This study focuses on YouTubers who produce SexEd media for youngsters. Specifically, **I ask how YouTubers construct their roles as SexEd professionals?** Accordingly, I aim to unveil YouTubers’ occupational identity, which stems from their worldview, pedagogy and beliefs regarding their educational role, and provide a lens to investigate YouTubers as non-formal edupreneurs.

To elaborate, the study sets out to uncover four objectives: (1) Profiling social influencers catering to youth. (2) Uncovering the worldviews of SexEd influencers. (3) Unveiling the ways that SexEd YouTubers foster professionalism. (4) Investigating the socialization of sexuality in the information age.

The study will illuminate sexuality socialization, with a specific gaze on social influencers which have emerged as a legitimate source of information that breaches traditional forms of literacy and brick-and-mortar instruction. Rather than viewing SexEd YouTubers as deviant providers of (mis)information and lowbrow entertainment, I intend to elucidate their ideological missions, actions and commitments to their young publics. This can advance new avenues for SexEd and initiatives within the school system and beyond.

# **Research Rationale**

Sexuality and Sex Education

While sexuality is a pillar of the human experience, it involves taboos, elicits secrecy, shame and guilt in Western societies (Aries, 1962; Benedikt, 1938; Foucault, 1996; Freud, 2002). Conversely, alternative perspectives view sexuality as an authentic expression, a human right, and legitimate source of pleasure, beyond its role for procreation (aka “sex positive”) (Comella & Queen, 2008).

In education, religious and conservative schools foster gender segregation and chastity, also known as *abstinence-only* (Ott & Santelli, 2007). In contrast, liberal approaches have introduced *comprehensive sex education* to school curricula. Counselors and teachers are encouraged to provide students with scientific information, know-how, and values associated with sex-positive practice. Since 2020, SexEd is required in the US in 30 states of which only 22 are required to instruct scientifically-based-information and there is no acceptable standard for SexEd programs (State Policies on Sex Education, 2020).

Accordingly, parents and educators often criticize inadequate sexual education in formal schooling (??). Moreover, scholars heavely criticized school curricula as highlighting normative heterosexuality as well as over-stating sexual risks (Bay-Chang, 2003; Fine, 1988; Schalet et al., 2014). An agenda that may increase with growing abortion restrictions in the US.

Given schools’ insufficient SexEd offering, the internet and pornography has become youth’s main source of information (Jones & Biddelcom, 2011; Zimmerman, 2016). An often unintentional source for unintentional risk-laden emulation and incidental learning (see Hamadeche, 1991). In contrast, in recent years there has been a notable rise in instructional content that is led by social influencers, primarily on YouTube, which has accrued immense popularity.

**Social Influencers and Sex Education**

Scholars highlighted the ways that social influencers develop entertainment and lifestyle content (e.g., “beauty gurus”, gamers and comedy, Jerslev, 2016; Riboni, 2017), yet their creed on the dissemination of educational information is understudied, including that of SexEd.

Nevertheless, some studies discussed various ways that YouTube affords information on sexuality for youngsters. For instance, Prybutok (2013) examined how educators employ YouTube videos for advocating youngsters’ judgment on sexual conduct and avoiding STDs. Exploring video content, Venetis (2018) investigated two popular SexEd channels on YouTube. She identified recurrent discussions of the "sex positive" approach, anatomy, sexual orientation, consent, contraception, and sexual know-how. Similarly, Simpson (2016) investigated feminist and queer vloggers and identified *sex positive* notions, often framed through their own identities. Also analyzing the video production of Laci Green’s Sex Plus and Lindsey Doe’s Sexplanationsls channels, Johnston (2016) focused on the influencers’ stardom and their ability to foster engagement and trust relations with viewers. Her study indicates the creation of a pseudo relationship between SexEd YouTubers and their audiences, and the development of a virtual community with the YouTuber assuming a role of authoritative and approachable leader.

In sum, scholars highlight the utility of SexEd videos for engaging educational content. Addressing their videos, researchers primarily focused on the *content* of these videos, YouTubers’ represented persona, community building and knowledge sharing. However, less attention was given to YouTuber’s creed as SexEd professionals and relations with fellow-YouTubers.

**Conceptual Framework**: **Professionalization and Social Media**

Exploring the ways YouTubers construct their roles as SexEd professionals invites a discussion on professionalism. The sociological taxonomy of occupations often divides them into three groups according to the degree to which they hold a monopoly over knowledge, autonomy in the workplace, ethical awareness and conduct (professions, semi-professions and non-professionalized occupations) [(Abbott and Wallace 1990:2)](https://paperpile.com/c/ij4tY6/Y6HL/?locator=2). Professions (e.g. doctors, engineers), as opposed to others operate by way of collegial systems that self-regulate, socialize new members, and ensure exclusive legitimation. Semi-professions such as nurses and teachers, only partially depend on scientific and esoteric knowledge. They require lesser training and their practice is mostly regulated by their employers rather than colleagues. On the lower status end, scholars highlighted non-professionalized occupations that do not undergo formal training, their labor is monitored and they do not bear any well-established code of conduct (e.g. assembly-line workers, custodial workers) (Harper and Lawson collection, 2003).

This classification is often seen as underpinning the strata of prestige, and constituting individual identity. Exploring identity, scholars highlighted the ways that individuals incorporate their occupational role to comprise their occupational identification (Becker, 1956; Harper and Lawson, 2003:xiii). Investigating occupational identity, researchers highlighted the ways that workers of lower status operate to elevate their occupational identities towards themselves and to others. Lee-Treweek (2003) discusses the ways that nurses reject notions of nursing as a nurturing occupation by embracing tasks which they see as elevating their identity, and approximating medical practices. These transformations (incremental or radical) are often driven by technology. For instance, travel agents may be at risk by e-commerce, while web designers are in great demand. In this regard, information based vocations are particularly responsive to change and have engendered librarians to change their craft from field-specific experts to guides of internet resources (Nelson and Irwin, 2014).

Exploring internet-based occupations, scholars identified the contradictory identities and motivations that underpin vloggers' work. Törhönen et. al (2019) highlighted the increasing workification of YouTubers’ play activities. Similarly, Bhatia (2017) underscores the emergence of vloggers over YouTube as a new form of digital professionals that create profitable tracts for informal education. Accordingly, he highlights what he deems as a transition from class instruction to “amateur experts” that construct a community of viewers, or learners. Tolson (2010) discusses tutorial vlogs and highlights the growth of a pedagogic monologue as a professional practice. Finally, Muller (2009) underscores a grassroot hierarchy that is constructed by YouTubers as they establish their status through seniority and acquired modes of discourse.

To conclude, the sociological study of professionalism underscores the dynamic and unstable nature of occupations, particularly in the information age. While recent studies underscore the growing significance of vloggers as emergent occupations, and allude to the construction of professionalism, no study to date systematically investigated how YouTubers construct their roles as professionals, nor do they address SexEd vlogging as a vocational pursuit.

# **Methodology**

To investigate the ways that sex educators on YouTube construct their roles and professionalism the study will employ an explorative and qualitative design which combines a grounded-constuctivist audio-visual analysis (Golan and Martini, 2019) with in-depth interviews (Slay & Smith, 2011). This phenomenological approach (Smith and Eatough, 2012) is tailored to capture the facets of SexEd YouTubers’ professional and performed identities. **Data context and collection**

To capture YouTubers’ professional and performed identities the study will employ purposeful sampling of SexEd channels (Miles & Huberman, as cited in Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Selecting relevant channels will be achieved through Google and YouTube’s search options. Complementing these online efforts, I will seek references from sex therapists and sex educators that will serve as key informants.

Channels’ criteria selection will predominantly highlight sexuality in a broad sense including relationships, romantic partnership, dating, sexual relations, sexual orientation and gender and will avoid explicit pornographic content. Furthermore, selected channels will be in English, current and active, bearing a significant number (thousands) of viewers that engage as ‘subscribers’, ‘commenters’ and ‘Likers’. Capping the study to include only English content limits the study’s scope. However, as English is a *lingua franca*, it is open to diverse populations, and in preliminary conversations with non-Anglo-American speaking YouTubers, these channels often set an example for regional video productions.

The final sample will include 25 channels and their vloggers. Engagement with YouTubers’ will be obtained through YouTube’s private messaging or YouTubers’ personal webpage. Furthermore, to attain trust and access to some of the interviewees, subjects might offer referrals to other YouTubers’ they know, thus employing a snowballing strategy (Grinnell, 1997).

**Procedure:** Investigating the 25 SexEd channels (5-videos per channel), audio-visual data collection will focus on body images, youth culture symbols, references to sexulity knowledge and channels content (see Table 1 protocol).

Following the channel examination, 25 in-depth Zoom interviews (30-60 minutes) will be conducted with popular YouTubers that focus on sexuality. Semi-structured interviews will include questions on the roles and professional identity of YouTubers, their motivations, educational and YouTube praxis, and relations with users (see interview protocol). All interviews will be recorded and transcribed, with participant’s informed IRB approved consent.

**Data Analysis**

Sampled channels will undergo a fine-grained audio-visual analysis (Golan and Martini, 2019). This will determine the content and pedagogical delivery strategies that are employed by SexEd YouTubers. This will be achieved through semiotic and thematic analysis specifically tailored to meet the study’s primary objectives (see Table 1: Audio-visual coding scheme).

Interviews will be analyzed using categorization techniques (Strauss and Corbin 1990). To ensure reliability, three independent researchers will analyze the entire dataset (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Categories obtained from separate analyses will be compared and discussed (Marshall and Rossman 2014). Differences and disagreements will be resolved through dialogue, leading to high inter-rater reliability between the researchers (Olesen et al. 1994).

Identified themes in both datasets will be compared and triangulated. This will enable trustworthiness, identifying the ways that YouTubers’ implement in the work their stated creed, as well as identify discrepancies, and accounted tensions.

**Appendix**:

**Table 1. Audio-Visual Analysis Coding Scheme**

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Objectives** | **Themes** | **Observations** | **Audio-Visual Indicators** |
| (1) Profiling social influencers catering to youth | Background | Age, ethnic, religion, gender diversity and sexual orientation representation | References to their origin, age, religious/traditional attire and visible ornaments (e.g., cross, hijab) and youth culture symbols |
| (2) Uncovering the worldviews of SexEd influencers | Perception of sexuality | Talking heads, animation or demonstration | Displaying body images, explicit content, open discussions of sexual activities, risks and/or sexual abstinence |
| Perception of youth | Self-presentation (talking head) and guest speakers | Discussing or displaying symbols associated with youth culture (tattoos, fashion, piercing) and contexts (e.g., school, club, video game) |
| Educational creed | Employing visual aids, lecturing, dialogue with viewers | Reference to information on sexuality, feelings about sexuality and experiences  |
| Approach to Gender diversity | Self-presentation (talking head) and guest speakers | References to diverse publics, LGBTQ+, ethnicity, gender |
|
| (3) Unveiling the ways that SexEd YouTubers foster professionalism | Symbolic Representation | Talking heads | Reference to academic certification, awards, scientific signifiers |
| Animation or demonstration | Reference to practices identified with medicine or science, or eastern philosophies of sexuality |
|
| Knowledge Representation | Introducing informative and visual aids (tables, diagrams) | Introducing and referencing information on sexuality |
| Underlining expressive aspects (e.g., humor, grievance, laughter)  | Highlighting positions towards sexuality (rather than knowledge) |
| Demonstration or self-account confessionals | Underscoring experience based know-how, rather than external knowledge |
| (4) Examining sexuality socialization in the information age | Sexuality Representation | Demonstration, visual aided lecturing or Talking head discussionSub-Categories: Broad/specific; moral boundaries/freedom, openness | Discuss issues about love, sexuality, sexual-maturation, contraception, gender, online privacy, maintaining personal space, relationships |
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**YouTuber Interview Protocol**

**Personal background**

Full name:

Age:

Gender:

Education:

Residence:

**Views**

* Where do people learn about sexuality, relationships, dating and love these days?
* Why do you think it’s important to talk about these subjects?
* Why is it important to do it on YouTube?
* Do you think that your views on sexuality differ from “traditional” views (from clerics, parents, school educators, others)? How?

**Occupational Identity**

* What is your occupation?
* What motivates you in your work?
* Why did you choose to use YouTube?
* How did you learn to use YouTube as a platform for your content?
* Do you see yourself as a YouTuber?

**Work concept**

* How would you describe your role?
* Do you feel like you have a mission that you hope to achieve through creating and uploading videos on YouTube?
* Do you have any background that supports your work?
* Do you feel like you have authority in a certain field?
* How do you make your viewers see you as someone they can/should learn from?

**Knowledge**

* How do you prepare your videos, what sources do you use on sexuality, if any, to plan your video? (scientific, experiential, eastern, other)
* How do you evaluate the quality of information on sexuality you wish to present?
* What topics do you prefer and which do you avoid? Please elaborate.
* Do you see some topics as risky? Please explain.

**Pedagogy**

* Can you describe the process you follow while working on a new video?
* Do you use any kind of (external?) resources while working on a video?
* How do you connect with your viewers? Is it important for you to connect with them?
* What do you want your viewers to ‘take’ from your videos?
* What kind of methods do you use in order to do that (Q&A, humor, demonstration, explanations, personal story, interviews etc.)?
* Do you see yourself more as an educator/friend/big brother to your viewers?

**YouTube Community**

* Who are your viewers? How do you know?
* Who is your target audience?
* Think of a viewer who has been following you since you started. Can you describe this person and their views on sexuality?
* Who are the YouTubers who produce similar content to yours? Are you in touch with any of them? Do they inspire you? Do you provide each other with any feedback?
* Do you use viewer’s feedback? Can you share an example?
* Do you use YouTube statistics (stats) in any way?
* Is your channel a source of income for you?

**Check List**

Project Personnel

Proposal Summary

Budget and Budget Justification

Proposal Narrative

Project Timeline

Project Team

Optional Supplemental Course Release

Optional Appendices A/B

Project Data (in the online form) - Within the online application, we ask you to choose the appropriate options with regard to your research project in the following categories: disciplinary perspective, methodologies, topics, geographical scope, contexts, and participants. This information is helpful in determining the appropriate reviewers for your proposal and for internal evaluations of our grant programs.

Signature from Authorized Representative of the Administering Organization