

Subscribing to Sex Edutainment: Sex Education, Online Video, and the YouTube Star

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Abstract

Although abstinence-only programs in the United States have historically failed to provide medically accurate information on sexual health, young people in the twenty-first century have turned to YouTube to answer their sex questions. The accessible and engaging format of the YouTube video has helped some sex educators achieve Internet fame among a mass audience of users devoted to watching their web series and interacting with them on social media. Using two sex education channels (Laci Green's *Sex Plus* and Lindsey Doe's *Sexplanations*) as case studies, this article investigates the ways in which YouTube stardom shapes the production of and engagement with online sex education videos. In doing so, the article uncovers how Internet fame helps to create a brand of sex education salient to audiences across media platforms that rely on the illusion of face-to-face interaction, the development of an authoritative yet approachable identity, and the cultivation of a virtual community.

Keywords

YouTube, celebrity, education, entertainment, audience, new media, sexuality

Introduction

Sitting against a tree in a San Francisco park, YouTube star Laci Green discusses how to achieve the perfect orgasm. ("Laci's Guide to ORGASM" (2013), one of many videos on sex education and relationship advice Green has produced on her YouTube

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channel *Sex Plus* (2010–present), shows her explaining the ways that people (particularly those with vaginas) can reach orgasm with a partner or on their own. Twenty-five-year-old Green speaks candidly to her viewers, like a cool older friend imparting tips on how to navigate the bumpy terrain of human sexuality. At one point, she admits to being “a baby about the cold” when putting on her jacket and later complains about changing locations between edits because of a man loitering near her film site. “Out of the whole freakin’ woods, Creeper McCreeperton decides, ‘Hey, I’ll set up camp five feet away from the girl talking about orgasms.’ Can you not?” Green says. The friendly and engaging tone Green employs in this video and many others has become characteristic of the mode of address many YouTube producers adopt. Yet, as a YouTube educator who has amassed a community of more than 1.4 million subscribers (as of March 2016), Green must balance both the educational content and the entertainment dimensions of her sex advice videos so that her followers feel informed, captivated, and invested enough to return. For many educators on YouTube, developing a star persona becomes an important consideration in creating a closely connected community that can relate to the values and goals the producer embodies and teaches.

Examining fame and the YouTube educator first requires an understanding of how other YouTube stars have used their popularity to sustain viewership. Media theorists researching stardom have analyzed celebrity as a cultural formation with a social function (Turner 2004), as well as a practice that occurs across a spectrum of fame (Marwick and boyd 2011). However, these studies mainly focus on individuals who have already achieved fame through other entertainment industries and are now extending it to online media. “DIY” (do-it-yourself) celebrity, rather, refers to the practice of Internet users becoming famous by personally broadcasting content on a media platform like YouTube (Burgess and Green 2009, 4). DIY stars like Grace Helbig, Tyler Oakley, and Hannah Hart have found success in creating personal and comedic videos that have garnered large online followings, accumulated high earnings from ad revenues, and in some cases, allowed them to obtain television, film, and book deals.

These “microcelebrities,” a term coined by Theresa Senft (2008) to describe Internet users who gain a cult or mainstream following online, have begun to change cultural notions of how individuals achieve fame and practice celebrity. According to Senft, one of the biggest changes seems to be in how followers interact with microcelebrities. Whereas “audiences desire someone to speak at them,” Senft (2012, 4) explains how “communities desire someone to speak with them.” Although YouTube certainly has users who do not always comment on videos and may actually seek content that “speaks at them,” the comments section and channel subscription feature embedded in the channel’s layout generate a communal feeling for those users wishing to take part in conversation about the videos they watch. As these YouTube communities “desire someone to speak with them,” it becomes crucial to know the extent to which this communication incites identification with the video producer (as well as what this identification looks like and means) to conceptualize the role Internet fame plays in how a viewer engages with the video material.

YouTube star personas also acquire other meanings in the field of sex education. According to Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States

(2014), sex education in the United States has notoriously excluded factual and inclusive information on sexual health with \$1.5 billion spent on abstinence-only programs since 1996 (at the time of writing, President Obama has proposed the elimination of all abstinence education funding for the 2017 federal budget). However, teens have found other ways to access comprehensive information on sex, particularly via the Internet. According to *Huffington Post* writer Deb Levine (2011), “Most youth and young adults use online search via Google or Bing or YouTube to learn about sex.” Health professionals and sex experts have since found methods to attract young audiences online using informative and entertaining content. Websites like Scarleteen and Sex Etc. have proven to be popular sites for teens to acquire information about sex and sexuality as well as interact with others on message boards, but YouTube seems to be one of the few places where sex educators are known by their names—not necessarily their affiliated organizations—and can thus build a star persona that speaks to a growing community of followers.

This article then strives to explore the influence stardom might have on the sex education community online and how identification with a YouTube producer contributes to viewer engagement with educational media content. Using Laci Green’s *Sex Plus* and Lindsey Doe’s *Sexplanations* (2013–present)—two sex education channels with large followings built around each producer’s star image—I will illustrate how sex educators on YouTube perform as stars and use their fame to connect with viewers and enrich the learning opportunities their videos offer. The significance of these sex experts’ star identities also adds to an existing community of educators in the entertainment industry. By exploring the intersection of education and entertainment on YouTube, a fuller understanding of how stardom shapes both user-generated content and viewer engagement can cultivate and sustain other ways of looking at YouTube celebrity and activity.

Star Identities in Educational Media

Educational films and videos, despite their cultural importance, have often been placed on the margins of film and media studies (Orgeron et al. 2012). Nevertheless, some scholarly attention has been devoted to studying the practice of educational filmmaking and how it transforms ways of thinking about pedagogy and learner experience (Ellsworth 2005; Van Riper 2011). Since YouTube’s inception in 2005, the emergence of educational videos has signaled a significant transition in how educators engage with learners. In a study conducted by Gayle Prybutok (2013) on the effectiveness of sexually transmitted infection prevention videos on YouTube, it was determined that young people valued “interesting and attention grabbing” video presentations and experienced positive associations with those videos where a health professional was present on screen (Prybutok 2013, 31). Although Prybutok concludes that YouTube can “facilitate behavior change regardless of the type of message appeal (entertaining or factual) presented,” she does not address how a producer’s presence and particular delivery style on screen enhances understanding and engagement with video content (Prybutok 2013, 31).

For a topic like sex education (which has long been associated with societal shaming and misleading information), the presentation style of the producer in the video could prove vital in attracting young viewers who have grown up in the limited learning environment of abstinence-only education. This might mean that sex education videos must first establish trust with their audience by addressing issues young people care most about (e.g., having sex for the first time, finding sexual privacy in college, etc.), using casual language relatable to young viewers, and facilitating a tolerant environment receptive to personal questions. Because these videos are on YouTube, they are also subject to the same enhanced forms of community building and active participation that have created stars out of some YouTube users. What requires further attention is how stardom can affect not only the presentation style of the sex educator on YouTube but also the way followers engage with video content.

The popularity of a web series can be persuasive in how audiences choose to watch and participate in an online community. For entertainment education, the role of identity might also be significant in shaping the learning experience of viewers, particularly as that identity is observed through the lens of stardom. In the mid-twentieth century, the star persona in sex education primarily flourished in sex advice newspaper columns, magazine articles, and radio shows (Bashford and Strange 2004). Interaction with this content occurred mostly within the margins of these “agony aunt” and “surrogate sister” columns of women’s and girls’ magazines, where readers could write in questions to be answered by the magazine’s sex experts (Boynton 2007). This “question and answer” model would later transition to television programs and digital podcasts, such as those by Dr. Ruth, Betty Dodson, and Dan Savage. As television talk shows developed, adult audiences phoned in questions to interact with hosts. According to Alison Bashford and Caroline Strange, the ability to *see* an expert rather than *read* their response in writing presumably allowed for more trust to be built between viewer and host. This “face-to-face exchange” would become important to this relationship because “in person the expert could delineate the precise relationship between himself or herself and the inquirer, but in print the identity of the expert/journalist [is] ambiguous” (Bashford and Strange 2004, 90). Television presents audiences with a personality they can watch and interact with through public phone conversation, fostering intimacy in the relationship and opportunities to participate. Yet, what a medium like television also offers viewers is both a sense of the producer’s popularity and respectability among audiences, creating a community that shares in honest and embarrassing sex stories and questions the host moderates on the air.

Broadcasting educational programs on television allowed audiences to assign a “face” not only to the knowledge they gained through regular viewings but also to their experience of learning from a figure they might grow to admire and trust alongside other viewers. Some prominent examples of educational stars on television include Bill Nye (*Bill Nye the Science Guy*, 1993–1998) and Fred Rogers (*Mister Roger’s Neighborhood*, 1968–2001). In addition to encouraging young audiences to be enthusiastic about learning, both men dedicated themselves to constructing public personas on screen and off. For instance, Nye’s TV identity (constructed as a tall man in a blue lab coat and bowtie) encouraged children to look at the silly and serious sides

of science by simulating simple home experiments and singing song parodies to remember lessons. Mister Rogers, as described by Ronald Bishop (2003, 27), intrigued news journalists because he continued promoting good citizenship even while away from the neighborhood of his children's show. Although children and pre-teens might have been captivated and inspired by the larger-than-life characters of *Bill Nye the Science Guy* and *Mister Rogers*, their relationship with these two men was mostly limited to the half-hour long episodes syndicated on PBS. This limitation, compounded by the fact that viewers could not actively interact with the host, would make it difficult for audiences to get to know the personal lives of the shows' stars more fully. As YouTube has developed into a popular broadcast site for educators, its affordances have made it possible for viewers to interact with the producer and participate more efficiently within the community.

Although scholarship on YouTube fame centers around more traditional modes of entertainment that include singing, dancing, comedy, and fashion (Burgess and Green 2009; Burns 2009; Vernallis 2013), little light has been cast on the growing sphere of educational videos and how they also develop star personas. Some users have managed to find popularity and success through the making of smart, informative, and interesting videos on a variety of subjects like history, science, and social justice. For example, Young Adult novelist John Green (*The Fault in Our Stars*, *Paper Towns*) and his brother Hank, who are known for creating the Nerdfighter YouTube community, expanded their Vlogbrothers (2007–present) channel to include educational web series like the multi-curriculum *Crash Course* (2012–present) and the science news program *SciShow* (2012–present). Another web show, *Go Verb a Noun* (2013–present), has worked to promote a variety of educational videos by interviewing up-and-coming educators on YouTube. The marketing and promotion behind these channels help develop the Greens' personas by drawing in viewers who want to be informed by the same figures everyone else is watching. The popularity of educators like the Green brothers can be compared with the likes of Bill Nye and Mister Rogers for adopting a pedagogical style that speaks directly to the audience and attempts to adapt educational subjects for a younger audience; however, the Green brothers can more easily court their viewers through a YouTube forum that enables community engagement online.

The significance of a star's public identity online and even off can be described by a social concept Senft (2008) has dubbed "strange familiarity." Senft coined this term in response to sociologist Stanley Milgram's "familiar strangers," which refers to people who know each other by sight but not by name. "Strange familiarity," however, describes a person's ability to feel like they know someone intimately without the other person knowing who they are. The one-sided nature of this strange bond (where you know the celebrity, but they do not know you) invokes what some scholars call a "parasocial relationship." Alice Marwick and danah boyd (2011, 144), writing on the celebrity–fan relationship over Twitter, describe the significance of the parasocial relationship online or "the illusion of a 'real,' face-to-face friendship with a performer." Social media sites like YouTube can complicate this relationship by making public the direct interaction the star has with fans. The fan's ability to respond to a star's YouTube

video or engage with them on other social media “de-pathologizes the parasocial and recontextualizes it within a medium that the follower may use to talk to real-life acquaintances” (Alice Marwick and danah boyd 2011, 148). Although YouTube already provides direct access to the star in a way that television does not by itself, the increased access fans have to their favorite YouTube personalities on other social media sites might deepen the relationship between both parties because social media can simulate real interaction. For educational channels, this engagement inside and outside the space of the web series has potential to fully integrate informative content into followers’ lives as the producer’s educational context foregrounds the interactions between producer and follower.

Modes of Address in Sex Education Videos

Before illustrating how producers of sex education videos build relationships with their followers on social media, it is important to outline the historical milieu from which these videos emerge to gain a sense of how media have previously influenced young people’s engagement and understanding of sex. Eric Schaefer (1999, 21) argues that sex education films in the early 1900s both “pulled back the veil of secrecy that cloaked venereal disease” and dramatized the dangers of sexual relations. Transmitting this message over film proved effective not only because it reached more audiences this way but also because the filmic medium visually reinforced the authority behind the screening of sexual lessons. Sarah Mirk (2014) of feminist magazine *Bitch* writes that “sex education is arguably more closely tied to film than any other subject in school” and because of this, “sex-ed films color our understanding of sexuality.” Sex education films shown in the classroom present an official attitude toward sex. As abstinence-only models are still used in classrooms today, this attitude often remains stuck between the biology of puberty and a dictionary list of sexually transmitted infections. Mirk credits this lack of comprehensive material to filmmakers wary of political opponents picking apart the films’ content, causing them to focus overwhelmingly on abstinence-only rhetoric. Although teens dissatisfied with sex education now turn to sexual apps and videos formatted for their phones, it remains necessary to document how sex educators have addressed viewers in the past and how those modes may still be vital in shaping sex education content online.

The sex education film as a site of authority first flourished among white servicemen during the two World Wars. Robert Eberwein (1999), in his book *Sex Ed: Film, Video, and the Framework of Desire*, closely traces sex education through the twentieth century from its early military use, to its migration to the classroom in the late 1940s, and finally to its availability on video tape for personal home use in the 1980s and 1990s. Arguing that films carry an “authoritative force,” Eberwein shows how early sex education films created to expressly prevent the spread of venereal disease among troops during the two World Wars adopted an “institutionalized authority of the observer” (Eberwein 1999, 43). The instructional film would usually follow a dramatic narrative where a doctor consults with a young man who has just contracted an unspecified venereal disease. Instead of simply relaying information on sexual health,

these films attempted to show viewers detailed, sometimes explicit images narrated by the all-knowing voice of a medical professional. Positioning the viewer as the patient ignorant of any medical understanding also opened up more opportunities for exploitation. For Eberwein (1999, 34), this exploitation occurred in how sex education films tried to “control sexual conduct through an emotional appeal.” To maintain healthy soldiers to win wars, sex education films depended on soldiers’ adherence to authority by enforcing the use of prophylactics; otherwise, these men could risk exposing their families to disease or even sustain serious disfigurement to their genitals. A reliance on these “fear” narratives, as narrativized in film, made it almost impossible to see a medical educator as anything but an enforcer of cautionary tales about sex.

After World War II ended, sex education films were approved by school boards and disseminated across classrooms in the United States. Eberwein writes that in 1947, the University of Oregon became one of the first institutions to produce sex education films made for public schools. The twenty-minute feature, *Human Growth*, simulated a classroom environment where a female teacher presented a short film discussing human reproduction and puberty. Eberwein (1999, 115) conveys that the “thematizing of the audience’s vision is a function of the pedagogical process” where “those watching the film, like those watching the film within the film, are encouraged to ask questions as members of an extended audience.” The mimetic model of a class watching a class watching a film became a valuable teaching tool in showing instructors how to encourage and field questions from young students curious about what they saw in the film. Although Eberwein does not explicitly call this model participatory, we can surmise that *Human Growth*’s attempt to “involve its audience more fully” became one of the first instances where sex education attempted to engage viewers (Eberwein 1999, 115). This shift from the isolating institutional gaze to the welcoming space of the classroom, where students could ask their teacher about anything from menstruation to vocal changes, illustrates how sex education began to be perceived as more of an open discussion between expert and audience rather than a lecture reliant on scare tactics.

Jumping ahead to the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, sex education films have balanced precariously between abstinence-only rhetoric and comprehensive education that uses popular culture as a pedagogical tool for sexual health. Catherine Ashcraft (2006, 2147) has been one proponent who has argued that popular culture responds to the “relational, power-laden aspects of sexuality that teens find relevant” and “offers sex education a powerful resource for sparking more effective and meaningful discussion of these relational aspects” Utilizing film and television examples in sex education can aid in discussions about relatable narratives involving teenage sexuality, yet the frequency with which pop culture pedagogy enters the classroom has not been extensively documented in more recent years. In fact, it might not have a dominant presence in schools at all if we refer to a 2015 study conducted by the Guttmacher Institute, which recorded that thirty-seven states require that information on abstinence be provided while only twenty-two require that sex education be mandated at all. Even if the integration of pop culture into sex education managed to successfully engage students in a comprehensive, intersectional discussion on sex,

Table 1. A Sample of Popular Sex Education Channels on YouTube.

Name/username	Channel	Joined YouTube	Number of subscribers	Number of views	Frequency of uploads
Laci Green	<i>Sex Plus</i>	November 14, 2008	1,486,933	121,694,843	Biweekly
Dr. Lindsey Doe	<i>Sexplanations</i>	May 22, 2013	216,865	23,792,543	Weekly
Hannah Witton	<i>Hannah Witton in Real Life</i>	September 4, 2009	173,947	13,668,455	Weekly
Kara Sutra	<i>Sex Ed 102</i>	March 1, 2007	37,731	14,705,478	Bimonthly
Betty Dodson and Carlin Ross	<i>Betty Dodson and Carlin Ross</i>	July 22, 2006	24,572	9,914,856	Biweekly
Reid Mihalko	<i>Reid about Sex</i>	June 11, 2009	4,629	2,391,341	Weekly

Source. YouTube (accessed on March 12, 2016).

these lessons probably do not reach every classroom, leaving students to turn to other outlets from which to receive information on sexual health.

The Internet has become a popular destination for questions, and although informational websites provide detailed and thorough answers, social media sites like YouTube seem to be one of the places where sex educators can assimilate into the digital communities where young people spend their time. In this way, sex educators on YouTube can work “outside the classroom” to inform teens about issues not taken up in school while also interacting with them in a casual space. The “fear” narratives of sex education films disappear in these YouTube videos, but we might wonder how authority and trust also change in these participatory online environments, and even more, how the dynamics of stardom seen in Laci Green and Lindsey Doe shape how viewers perceive their legitimacy.

“Let’s Talk about Sex”: Laci Green and Lindsey Doe

Sex education videos have steadily become more widespread online as sex educators and sex enthusiasts have used YouTube’s personal broadcasting platform to find an audience. Although only a few video channels actively produce content on a weekly or biweekly basis (thereby becoming more popular), other sex educators post every couple of months or even more inconsistently than that (Table 1). Because Green and Doe are highly consistent in posting videos, these two were chosen as case study subjects for this investigation of Internet fame and sex education videos. Although these two women have similar approaches in mediating conversations on sex, there are a few notable differences in their presentation style and in how they attract audiences.

Green, who is in her twenties, has been hosting and producing *Sex Plus* since 2010, while thirty-something Doe and her show, *Sexplanations*, have only been around since 2013. The extra time Green has spent on YouTube has given her the opportunity to build an audience of more than 1.4 million subscribers, covering a variety of topics in feminism, sexual health, relationship issues, and gender and sexuality. Because of her long and influential presence on YouTube, non-profit organizations (Planned Parenthood) and media networks (Discovery Channel, MTV) have asked her to host

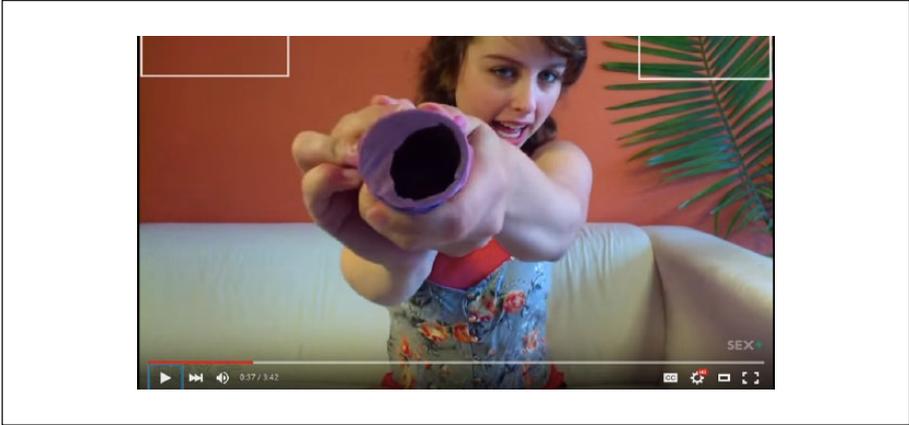


Figure 1. Laci Green shows her viewers the “vagina” she made to demonstrate how the hymen stretches rather than “pops.”

web series on their respective channels. Doe, however, holds a PhD in human sexuality, works as a clinical sexologist, and for eight years taught a sexuality course at the University of Montana. Although slightly older than Green, Doe has nevertheless captured a young audience who recognize her affiliation with Hank Green from the popular Vlogbrothers channel. In the span of nearly two years, Doe’s subscription numbers jumped to more than 100,000, thanks to the Nerdfighters, the community of nerds and fans on YouTube founded by Hank and John Green. Between Laci Green’s gradual rise to YouTube fame and Doe’s built-in audience, YouTube celebrity reveals that it can manifest in a number of different ways for sex educators seeking an audience.

For Laci Green, *Sex Plus* began as a way for her to have the kinds of conversations about sex that were not taking place around her. Some of her most viewed videos, such as those on public nudity from 2011 (“The Naked Life”) and myths about the hymen from 2012 (“You Can’t POP Your Cherry! HYMEN 101” 2012), catapulted her to fame on YouTube and feminist media sites. In the latter video, Green talks directly to her audience on her couch while creating a vagina using a toilet paper roll and pink cloth (Figure 1). As seen in the figure, Green cuts a hole in the cloth to illustrate what the hymen looks like and how it can stretch out—but not “break”—over time when a person is sexually active. Supplementing this demonstration, Green imparts her thoughts on the misogynistic language surrounding virginity and how describing the hymen as “popping one’s cherry” contributes to first-time fears of engaging in sex. The end of the video sees Green elaborating on how a person can have sex without it devolving into a “big bloody pain” that many teens hear about from their peers. Throughout this video, and many others, Green conspicuously departs from the fear narratives seen in past sex education films and instead attempts to demystify false information through a metaphorical demonstration. Her direct address to the camera, a style popular among many YouTube broadcasters, also makes her viewers feel like she is being honest and straightforward with them.

Although this mode of address allows Green to cultivate a closer relationship with her followers, it is not the only element that contributes to the construction of her star status. Many other YouTube stars adopt similar methods of direct address, but their videos also possess professional production qualities that prompt viewers to associate them with other Internet celebrities. The development of stardom in the YouTube community, then, relies on an understanding of what celebrity does and does not look like online. The person in the video may look and talk like the viewer, but the production values of the video suggest that a class divide still exists between producer and viewer, emphasizing the higher role the producer plays in the relationship. The viewer might then see the person in the video as an authority figure, yet unlike the sex education films that used explicit images to frighten viewers, Green's authority emerges from her perceived status as an Internet celebrity who many other viewers seem to trust.

Viewing a YouTube producer as an authority figure can sometimes lead to hero worship, but in other instances, it can also dehumanize the person and make them susceptible to online harassment. Like many YouTube celebrities, Green has become the target of intense scrutiny from the Internet. An article in *The Daily Dot* reported that Green was driven off the Internet for a month in 2012 by a "relentless wave of harassment, cyberbullying, and criticism" for her feminist beliefs and her use of the slur "tranny" in one of her earlier videos (Dunn 2014). The intimidation escalated when someone posted Green's address online and sent her exterior photos of her apartment. Other female and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer YouTubers have endured similar ordeals, raising concerns that digital celebrity culture can become dangerous for women and sexual minorities when it does not protect them from harmful participants. YouTube's guidelines prohibit hate speech, and reported violations are usually blocked or banned. However, this does not prevent users from creating new accounts to continue the harassment. Unlimited accessibility can sometimes leave YouTube stars vulnerable to mental abuse and verbal threats, particularly because they usually have no one to protect them except for themselves. Yet, popular stars like Green have turned these attacks into teachable moments, demonstrating to their followers how someone can stand up to cyberbullying. A video Green posted in 2015 about her battle with depression (titled "Depression") illustrates a case where stars can use their fame to teach their viewers and raise awareness of mental health issues. Still, harassment of feminist-identified video producers is prevalent and can influence how YouTube stars negotiate their relationship with their followers.

In contrast to Laci Green's bumpy relationship with her viewers, Lindsey Doe has mostly dealt with a built-in audience that associates her online persona with the Nerdfighter community. Perhaps because of the Nerdfighters' mission to "decrease world suck" by raising money for charities, Doe seems to receive little harassment from her followers. Another potential reason could be that Doe, like her followers, also identifies as a Nerdfighter and fan of Hank and John Green, making her seem relatable to those who watch her videos (Figure 2). Doe has also found other ways to communicate her accessible identity to her followers, such as through the creation of her personal channel, DoeEyes (2014–present), and the interactions she has had with fans during live YouTube hangouts. The personal atmosphere of DoeEyes compared with



Figure 2. Lindsey Doe (right) flashes the “Nerdfighter sign” with Sex Geekdom founder Kate McCombs (left).

Note. Such subtle nods to her geeky audience reaffirm Doe’s identity in her community.

the professionally produced *Sexplanations* provides viewers with an image of Doe as a regular person who copes with similar day-to-day activities and struggles. Doe becomes more than just a star educator on YouTube—she becomes a member of a community of fans. In this way, the content of Doe’s sex education videos develop into an exchange of knowledge among active participants who feel a closer relationship to the information shared by a fellow member of their community.

Although her videos address similar issues to Green’s, Doe usually offers a more scientific and historical approach to the sex education she teaches. The title sequence at the beginning of each video introduces her as “Dr. Doe,” and she frequently films her show directly in her medical office. This seems to cue audience members to feel like they are students or patients meeting with Doe; however, the show’s characterization of Doe as a quirky “sex geek” who genuinely cares about the health and well-being of her viewers cuts through that authoritative barrier. In Doe’s first video (“Meet Lindsey Doe!” 2013), she introduces herself and her qualifications by stating what kind of health information she plans to teach her viewers. After addressing the question of why she got into sexology, Doe is asked by someone off screen what her favorite joke is. Although not relevant to the content of Doe’s channel, such informal and personal questions work to define her identity and break down the wall between her authority as a sexologist and the viewer as an inexperienced student. The video then ends with Doe describing the variety of questions her audience may ask her. Her eccentric energy and enthusiasm for nerdy interests (at one point, she states that she has considered watching reruns of *Firefly* over having sex) fit comfortably within her target audience that consists of Nerdfighters and other sex knowledge geeks. Her catch phrase, “Stay curious!” at the end of each video also functions as a branding tool that affirms and validates her show as a work of entertainment that is not purely

instructional. In turn, viewers can begin to feel more engaged with the content when it comes from someone who can make it relevant, familiar, and fun. The way star educators choose to address and demonstrate an understanding of their audience's interests can potentially facilitate identification with the educator and an overall openness in the viewer to what they have to teach.

Audience Participation in the Online Community

It has been stated so far that YouTube producers like Green and Doe can control their public image through the way they present themselves in their videos. In addition, the narratives these video producers construct online—predicated on their modes of address, reinforcement of a consistent online persona, and even their popularity as Internet stars—can contribute to a follower's engagement and participation with the media content. Although interacting with viewers over YouTube fosters a relationship with the star, addressing followers in other spaces can reveal multiple sides to a star who appears to be engaging with followers "outside of work hours." When a YouTube star chooses to interact with followers on sites like Facebook, Twitter, or Tumblr, followers can experience what Elizabeth Ellcessor (2012, 51) calls "perceived access to private backstage behavior." Although not every Internet user will go so far as to comment on a star's Facebook post or respond to a tweet, the ability to witness the star's activity in other media spaces builds a larger world for the user in which to recognize the star. A relationship is then forged between star and follower, whether it be passive (viewing, not commenting) or active (viewing and commenting). To make this relationship more active though, producers can invite their audiences to create their own content or comment on a particular issue presented in the video. Question and answer sessions have been effective in enforcing the two-way nature of educational videos because they encourage curious viewers to ask questions anonymously. Although this mode of engagement allows the producer to gather material and ideas for their next video, it also positions them as a significant figure conveying personally meaningful information to an audience. Viewers might then begin to look to the YouTube educator as an accessible source for knowledge as well as a DIY celebrity who makes them feel valued in the community.

As producers recognize the desires and concerns of their audience, they attempt to use their followers' participation to help them expand their community outreach in the real world. YouTube educators in particular have the advantage of staging their web presence at university campuses and community centers where they give talks on issues relevant to students and other interested individuals. Public talks not only entice Internet audiences to attend but also introduce non-Internet audiences to the educator's YouTube channel, thus expanding viewership across different contexts. In a way, this convergence of different audiences in multiple spaces (inside and outside of YouTube) fits into P. David Marshall's (2002, 69) notion of the "new intertextual matrix" where audiences "learn about a product through its association in other cultural forms." As the producer becomes more recognizable in other spaces, the value of their stardom increases. In other words, the producer further expands and builds on their celebrity persona as they become identifiable in other texts.



Figure 3. To fund her channel, Lindsey Doe offers merchandise—like (a) T-shirts with her catch phrase “Stay Curious” and (b) coloring books on masturbation—for followers to purchase.

Maintaining follower loyalty and satisfaction, then, begins to take the shape of a business. For some YouTube stars who wish to devote the majority of their time to producing their channel, asking for monetary donations in exchange for merchandise and other incentives can become a lucrative prospect (Figures 3a and 3b). This allows producers to support themselves financially so that viewers can receive more quality content and perks that identify them as fans, thereby nurturing their devotion to the channel. Collecting merchandise like t-shirts or buttons connects followers to the YouTube producer because it becomes a part of their identity. Displaying a wristband or necklace with either the channel’s logo or an inside joke can make a fan feel more included in a YouTube community that is deemed exclusive. This sense of kinship, while nurtured by other members online, bolsters the YouTube producer’s stardom, making them not only widely recognizable but also influential in the scope of their channel’s purpose.

However, not all audiences accept the image the YouTube star tries to sell them in a positive way; even so, resistance to that image might be a good thing. As noted earlier, some members of the feminist community criticized Green for ignorant statements made in her early videos. Moreover, although Doe has not been the subject of such incensed criticism, she has still dealt with a few negative remarks regarding her open approach in talking about reproductive health. During a video asking followers for donations (“Help Us!”), Doe read a message from a viewer who claimed that she found Doe’s videos about sex “revolting.” Yet, after having her first sexual experience, the viewer confessed that Doe’s videos were indeed helpful. Choosing to then share that story with Doe demonstrates the influence stardom might have on followers as

they seek recognition from the person who has inspired their new way of thinking. According to Gooyong Kim (2011, 5), YouTube videos can help participants realize the “core value of collective pedagogy as a continuous communication among members of society through participatory dialogue and self-reflection on the issue” In this way, the YouTube video can promote individuals’ critical awareness of themselves. As viewers continue to watch these sex education videos online, Green and Doe’s direct address to the camera and their authoritative, yet relatable presence function as important communicative tools in challenging their audience to reevaluate preconceived notions of sex learned in school and other social spaces.

Through their modes of address, sex educators can construct a narrative online that attracts viewers to their community. Examining the process of narrative persuasion in entertainment education, (Michael Slater and Donna Rouner (2002, 175) note how “successful entertainment-education efforts attract audiences, not because of their educational or persuasive content, but because they are compelling drama.” Young people might feel drawn to sex education because YouTube producers are able to create narratives that relate to their viewers’ present preoccupations with sex and sexuality. In addition, narratives can amplify the influence of participation and mediate between the fulfillment of personal needs and a shared emotional connection (Escobar et al. 2014, 71). The narratives displayed within YouTube videos can then be shared among other participants, indicating their importance to the viewer. In their study of the Nerdfighter community, Mariana Leyton Escobar et al. (2014, 71) discover that “spreading these types of narratives in OCs [online communities] might be key not only for channeling participation, but also for creating more cohesive communities, and even for guiding behavioral change.” Although the narratives sex educators devise seem crucial to spreading their message online, they also have value in shaping the way a community feels and acts. What that behavioral change looks like might require more time as sex education continues to grow on YouTube. But for now, we can recognize YouTube as an influential platform for educators to develop star personas and interact with a community that can more efficiently engage with the material presented to them.

Conclusion

By tracing the production of, and engagement with, sex education videos on YouTube, this article has aimed to illustrate the influential mechanisms that allow Internet stardom to help attract and connect audiences to a particular text. In addition, it has shown how sex education has been affected by these mechanisms as it continues to evolve in the space of the YouTube video. In the classroom, sex education films have been widely used as pedagogical tools to instruct students on a generationally conventional way of understanding sex. As sex education has migrated online, that information has become more inclusive of different sexualities and gender identities and more comprehensive in how young people can safely practice sex.

However, one of the most significant changes that has happened to the content and tone of sex education has been the impact of stardom on the delivery and sharing of

information. If we keep in mind the concept of spreadable media formulated by Henry Jenkins et al. (2013), self-branding becomes an effective tool for expanding one's audience and reputation across multiple media sites. Lindsey Doe's catch phrase "stay curious" and Laci Green's catchy theme song illustrate ways in which sex educators try to self-brand for their audiences to recognize them across multiple platforms. This tactic also works to establish the video producer as an authority figure in control of their web presence. As individuals are exposed to a consistent image of the video producer online, the producer can build a reputation that encourages follower loyalty and trust with the content they create.

The audience's decision to circulate video producers' content also reveals that they have a stake in the producers' message. In this regard, it is important that sex education on YouTube ensures that video content connects with audiences not only in a formal and entertaining way but also in a manner that represents and accommodates the changing attitudes young people have toward sex and sexuality. Adapting to the culture of Internet stardom among YouTube's most successful users also becomes necessary for sex educators hoping to spur discussions on legislative change for sex education programs. President Obama's proposal to eliminate funding for abstinence-only education for the 2017 federal budget indicates a growing trend toward more comprehensive sex education in the United States; yet, how these changes will be enacted in public schools has yet to be determined. Despite this move toward more thorough methods of teaching sex, YouTube still plays a significant role in community building and engagement with sex education outside educational institutions. The loyalty and trust built into the video producer's star brand helps sustain interest in sex education beyond the classroom. Sex education on YouTube, then, can be seen not only as an extension of the programs taught in schools but also as a community that continues to inform and share insights into sexuality long after young people have passed through the classroom doors.

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