How Do We Learn and Think about Sex?
An exploration into the effects of popular media and media literacy on sex education

A thesis by
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Abstract

This project is an exploration of the ways popular media interacts with sex education and sex-positivity. This paper is a mixture of scholarly research and auto-ethnographic work. While data and critical analysis often feels reductive to lived experiences, I approach my research with an open mind, and contribute my own narratives. In Part One, I will give context to popular mediums and talk about the importance of authentic representations in the media. This part of my paper is highly influenced by notions of stigma, stereotype, and accuracy. During this research, I came to view media literacy as a tactic to properly enjoy media representations, without letting them override comprehensive ways of understanding social life. Part Two of this paper is focused on media literacy and its importance in sexual health education.

Alongside this paper, I created a podcast with three episodes. Each episode is a recorded conversation among Vassar College students sharing personal experiences of sexual education and media messaging. To create a space for students to speak their mind, I carefully selected students with sex-positive perspectives who were comfortable speaking candidly about sex. I joined in these discussions and shared my own exposure to sexual health topics, but also used this time to share my research with my peers.

Introduction

Key Terms

Sex

More than anything, this paper is an exploration. I use that word to emphasize the never-ending process of learning and understanding the heavy topics discussed in this paper. Sex is one of them. It is difficult to give a concrete definition of what sex is, because sex means something different to everyone. Sexual expression varies across race, gender, sexuality, culture, region, etc. To give one concrete definition would be unproductive to my overall goals.

In this paper, I acknowledge all forms of sexual expression as legitimate and natural. In summation, "sex as a concept is so polysemic that it can refer to very different realities and constructs" (Olveira-Araujo and Argiñano 2021:2). While it may be difficult to imagine realities outside of our own, doing so will improve the health and well-being of others, as this paper will later argue.

Sex-Positivity

According to White et al. (2023:1225) "...sex-positivity allows individuals to conceptualize sex as a subjective experience in which each person is agentic in their exploration of and relationship with sex." A sex-positive framework promotes the validity of a person's individual, subjective sexual experiences and advocates for universal access to age-appropriate, comprehensive sexual health information. Additionally, sex-positivity acknowledges the pleasurable aspects of sexuality (Nimbi et al. 2022).

The sex-positive movement emerged in the 1970s. The movement was spirited by white, liberal feminists advocating for sexual liberation. This history is important to note, as the

founders of the term came from a position of privilege. While sex-positive frameworks destigmatize consensual sex, they limit definitions of "good" and "consensual" sex. Sex-positive attitudes uplift those who choose to have sex for pleasure and procreation, but overlook those who do it for economic, social, or survival purposes. Some critics of the framework believe it is overly individualistic. These scholars assert that consent is not merely an individual choice, but a socio-political one. Additionally, sex-positivity maintains that sexual pleasure is attainable, and that sexual consent is possible for all individuals. However, for some, sexual wellness is far from accessible (Clements 2024). I say all of this to highlight the privilege that goes into embracing a sex-positive attitude. In my work, I would also like to uplift those left out of this perspective. Bond and Radix (2023:242) state their overall goal as "a culture where each person is guided in having a safe and pleasurable sex life," and I wholeheartedly agree with this sentiment.

Accuracy

The internet and social media have become spaces for information acquisition, however, fact-checking is not common practice. For this reason, certain terms have emerged. Misinformation (also known as false information) is spread by accident, with no bad intentions. Disinformation, on the other hand, is intentionally misleading (Gurgun et al. 2023). Both types of information show up on the internet.

Accuracy is often taken for granted on the internet. Accuracy is grounded in the truth, and a lot of information on the internet is not. Plus, the issue of accuracy can get particularly tricky when analyzing lived experiences. This is an issue I grapple with throughout this paper. Many media scholars struggle to define "good" and "accurate" representations because there is no systematic way to evaluate them. An evaluation would diminish the identity of those represented (Ward 2004).

Representation

Media scholars believe that the media one consumes can play a prominent role in constructing self-conceptions, as "...representations are the building block of culture, which in turn is how we give meaning to the world" (Saha 2024:2). Popular media provides scripts for internalized ideals and social interactions. Due to this ability, it is important that people are able to find media that represents their identities (Ward 2004).

Negative representations of disenfranchised groups harm individuals who internalize them, or who become victims of a society that internalizes them (Ward 2004). Therefore, I find it crucial to hold media representations accountable for the damage they do to developing minds.

Stigma

Stigma is a particularly important topic when discussing medical interventions. As is argued in the media literacy chapter, public health campaigns and interventions often have ulterior motives beyond simply providing health information. In our capitalist structure, there are reasons an informant might choose to spread hegemonic, harmful information (Rice and Atkin 1994).

Teachings on social and physical health do not exist in a vacuum. As Pinkleton et al. (2008:464) state: "the specific nature of [sexual health] programs depends on the social and political context in which they are developed and delivered." Overlooking this fact impairs critical understandings of how health is impacted by biased perspectives.

Sex itself faces a lot of stigma. "Sexual pleasure has been viewed as a threat to social, political, and religious order throughout history " (Bond and Radix 2023:243). As a result, many

sexual health interventions choose to center risk and disease, which reinforces the stigma attached to sex.

Goals

Before diving into the paper, I would like to state my intentions. This work is complicated because it mixes the academic with the intimate. Writing about topics like these is vulnerable work. Reading this can be vulnerable work as well.

While I rely on scholarly sources to inform and inspire my arguments, I also include personal observations in an autoethnographic manner. So much of what I have read throughout my research relates to my lived experience, and I choose to share examples to illustrate the realities of my assertions. A lot of my examples are media artifacts, such as television shows, films, and social media posts.

In my own work, I make a conscious effort to uphold the values of sex-positivity (while keeping in mind the aforementioned limitations). I aim to use updated and inclusive language at all times. In writing this paper I hope to contribute to the destigmatization and naturalization of sex. That said, I do recognize that I have my internal biases, my shame, and my internalized sex-negative attitudes. This work is ongoing.

A lot of the scholarship I cite in this paper is limited in its language and inclusion. Most sources speak about gender on the binary. For this reason, a lot of my assertions are focused on those who identify on the binary.

The first part, Sex and Sex Positivity in Digital Media, discusses the pros and cons of sexual representations in popular media. It will give background to hegemonic beliefs and influences while talking about the grassroots and subcultural aspects of social media. This part of

the paper will give background to the second part, which is centered around media literacy. Ideally, the first part of the paper will convince the reader that media literacy is necessary for everyone living in a digital society. Part Two, "Media Literacy," shares a comprehensive definition of media literacy and data on its effectiveness. I also provide a summary of my podcast in Part Two.

Part One: Sex & Sex Positivity in Digital Media

Chapter One: The Presence of Sex in Digital Media

Learning about Sex

In terms of sex and relationships, adolescents often learn from their parents, peers, and the media. Parents typically pass along their values, expectations, and knowledge of sex, specifically from a biological perspective. Peers often inform adolescents on dating practices and partner attractiveness. While these two sources are highly influential, many adolescents turn to media outlets to ask questions that are not answered by parents and peers (White et al. 2023).

The internet has what some scholars call a "high teaching potential," as 93% of adolescents visit at least one website a day (Marques et al. 2015). With this heightened internet usage, adolescents are inundated with sexual media content. Not only is this content filled with glamorized, fictionalized, and misleading depictions (Austin et al. 2015), more often than not, these depictions are also heteronormative and misogynistic (White et al. 2023). Digital media spaces often claim to be inclusive, but in reality, they typically reproduce pre-existing inequities for marginalized communities (Eguchi 2024).

Young adults generally draw their information from multiple media sources. In a study done by White et al. (2023), they found that 85.63% of adults learn about sex from television, 84.16% from movies, 71.85% from peers, and 60.12% from social media. This demonstrates that digital media has a big impact on the way emerging adults think about sex. Therefore, the representations of sexual relationships in mainstream media matter.

In a separate study by Pinkleton et al. (2008), 86% of teens were unable to name a role model for positive, healthy decisions about sex. Most sexual content in the media normalizes casual sex for teenagers. This early exposure to sexual content increases rates of early sexual

activity and teen pregnancy (Austin et al. 2015). Adolescents are likely to emulate the behaviors of media characters they find desirable or attractive. In most popular media, these characters engage in sexual relationships without suffering long-term repercussions. These representations are inaccurate and encourage adolescents to overlook real-life consequences (Pinkleton et al. 2012).

The internet drastically altered the sexual landscape, as it made all types of sexual content much more accessible (Döring 2009). In their study, Paasonen et al. (2023) noted how social media has reconfigured our understanding of the social landscape. Döring (2009) and Paasonen et al. (2023) highlight the ways in which technological advances have altered social understandings and interactions. As Döring (2009) states in her paper, the internet offers an abundance of information that users can consume discreetly, which may promote awareness of sex and other taboo topics. Additionally, the internet can aid in masturbation practices, sexual communication, safe sex and STI knowledge. Many individuals find safe spaces to discuss stigmatized sexual experiences and fantasies online.

While the internet can be an information tool, it is important to recognize the negative aspects of increased internet availability. Cyberporn addictions are becoming more common in adolescents, and particularly affect those with comorbid psychological disorders such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, anxiety, depression, and alcohol addiction. Furthermore, as discussed above, harmful representations can negatively affect emerging adults' sexual scripts and ways of understanding (Saha 2024). Cyberporn in particular is recognized for its harmful and sexist depictions (Döring 2009).

Generally, there is a concern for how much sex children and teenagers are exposed to in the media. However for children, media can be an outlet for learning about sex in an

environment free from embarrassment or discomfort. Given these implications, adolescents typically use media to learn more about adult topics and adulthood. Unfortunately, the media is not always providing an accurate representation on these issues. And even more unfortunately, if adolescents do not have resources to fact-check, they will internalize the inaccurate information they learn from media content (Ballam and Granello 2011). Even when emerging adults learn accurate information from guardians and professionals, social media and other digital media formats can influence behavior that contradicts these interventions. So, it is important that media and in-person education work hand in hand to provide accurate, useful, and inclusive information for sexual health (Francis et al. 2021).

Television

Adolescents use television and film to inform them of social and environmental information. Out of the digital mediums discussed in this paper, television is one of the less democratized. Unlike social media, television is not user-driven (White et al. 2023). I use this analysis to frame television, as I want to emphasize its intrinsic relationship with hegemonic, capitalist values.

Film has a history of policing. From 1934 to 1968, films in the United States were censored and policed by the Production Code Administration (PCA). A formal code, known as the PCA or Hays Code, was drafted in 1930. Will H. Hays was the founder of this film police force, and he made sure the PCA held producers accountable. In 1934, Hays and the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPAA) decided on the code to deter federal policing of films. The Supreme Court did not believe films should have First Amendment protection, and therefore a censoring system was required. With the Hays Code, authority was able to stay within the film industry. Initially the code was incredibly restrictive, but starting in

1954, certain prohibitions were deleted. In 1954, language that had previously been taboo, but was then accepted into popular dialogue, was allowed into films. Additionally, the update in 1954 allowed more subject matters to show up on screen– such as kidnapping and miscegenation. In 1966, the film *Blow-Up* intentionally defied censorship from the PCA, and instead chose to advertise with the label "Suggested for Mature Audiences." This was the start of the transition into our modern rating system. However, it was not until 1968 that the Hays Code was officially repealed. More and more, films wanted to include taboo subject matter, so it was only a matter of time before the Hays Code was forced into extinction (Doherty 2017).

In the early 1920s sexual hygiene films gained popularity. They were graphic in name and content, and generally unpleasant to watch. This was a time when films were silent. Most of these films displayed sexually transmitted illnesses. Some example titles include: *Is Your Daughter Safe?*, *Fools of Passion*, and *Unwed Mothers*. Even from the titles it is clear that these films took a moral stance against extramarital relations, with a specific fixation on women (Stevens 1983).

By 1927 sexual hygiene films reached their peak popularity. However, with this newfound popularity, the Hays Office was alerted of their graphic content. At first, The Hays Office worked to produce their own sexual health films in cooperation with the American College of Surgeons. These films did not receive much acclaim. By 1928, the Hays Office announced that all major studios were to boycott these hygiene films. This did not lead to the downfall of the genre, but rather the invention of talking pictures did (Stevens 1983).

In the late 1950s, sexploitation films came onto the scene. The sexual hygiene films from the 1920s are considered a precursor to these films as well as nudist documentaries. Both of these pre-existing genres dealt with sexuality in some way or another while advertising

themselves as education. Sexploitation films were filled with representations of sexuality, but they were not for educational use. This new genre offered displays of seduction, voyeurism, nudity and fetish. They tended to be independent films, produced on a low budget, and targeted for "adults only" audiences (Schaefer 2012).

According to Shaefer (2012:152), "For better or worse, sexploitation films paved the way for a broadly sexualized popular culture that we now experience in print, on television, in films, and on the internet."

When analyzing films from 1979 to 1989, Sapolsky and Tabarlet (1991) found that sex most often appears in comedies and dramas. Use of innuendos and comedic displays of sexual acts were the most common presentations of sex. Much like sexploitation films, these depictions often lacked any educational aspects. Mentions of STIs, birth control, or abortion were super rare. Sapolsky and Tabarlet (1991) argue that sex was mostly used to lure in viewers to raise ratings and make money.

Teen sex comedies reached popularity in the early 1980s. Again, sex was used to lure audiences and to make a profit. Initially these films were for male audiences. However, as female heterosexuality was becoming more culturally prominent, teen sex comedies were made for women, too. The production and popularization of teen sex comedies speaks to market trends. In the 1980s, it was more socially acceptable to express sexuality in a joking manner in film (Nowell 2014). This insight allows us to follow the dynamic shifts in the cultural acceptance of sexual content in mainstream film and television.

Many popular television shows use awkward and nerve-wracking sexual situations for comedic purposes. However, some of these situations may also offer critical information to viewers. An example of this occurs in the television show *Friends*, which initially aired in 1994,

but continues to be a classic. There is a plotline in which Rachel (played by Jennifer Aniston) gets pregnant due to a faulty condom. When she tells the father, Ross (played by David Schwimmer), there is a dramatic and hilarious scene where he realizes that condoms are only 97% effective. So, while this episode maintains its comedic grounding, it also informs the audience of the risk of unplanned pregnancies. This is an example of the ways in which film and television are able to balance educational content with entertainment.

As I reflect on the shows my friends and I have watched, a pregnancy scare is not an uncommon trope. Cece (played by Hannah Simone), in the television series *New Girl,* also experiences a pregnancy scare, though she does not end up pregnant. This show aired from 2011 to 2018. It is more contemporary than *Friends*, but the same trope is carried on.

While the examples above do demonstrate some productive representations in sitcoms, it is also important to recognize that they are sitcoms– every character ends up happy in the end. Rachel does have an unplanned child, but she is able to afford that child and raise it. So, while the storyline may subtly promote safe sex, it does not do the full work of portraying the difficult complications that an unplanned pregnancy can cause. Additionally, television shows like this do not represent abortions or sexually transmitted infections.

Pose, which premiered in 2018 (but is set in the 1980s), is not a sitcom. With its narrative highs and lows, it is labeled as a drama. The cast is majority black and transgender. This is a show that portrays the unspeakably hard experience of queer black people living with HIV/AIDS. Some characters, such as Candy Johnson-Ferocity, die during the show, leaving other characters to mourn. Unlike the storylines of sitcoms, *Pose* is unafraid to show viewers the possible negative outcomes of unprotected sex and the work of systematic oppression on disproportionate outcomes.

A few months ago I watched the film *Good Luck to You, Leo Grande*. I was struck by it, as it so clearly takes on the sex positivity movement. The film focuses on a young man of color and an older white woman. The man, Leo Grande (played by Daryl McCormack), is a sex worker that the woman (played by Emma Thomson) hired to learn about her own sexuality. Over the course of the film, the audience learns that she was in a traditional, conservative marriage. The sex she had experienced in her lifetime was a male-centered, non-experimental act. The narrative she shares about her previous sex life is in line with many media representations of heterosexual, male-dominated relationships, and reinforces hegemonic ideals. However, her journey throughout the film counters these hegemonic values and creates a complicated narrative that allows the audience to explore their own sexual biases.

Social Media

The rise of social media has come to redefine what it means to be social (Paasonen et al. 2023). For many adolescents, it is part of their daily lives. I know it is a part of mine. Social media is a platform that facilitates the building of social networks and peer relationships, but it is also an outlet for individuals to express themselves. People often use social media to access information, entertainment, and relationships. Because of all of this, social media has become integral to framing identity development and management (Berger et al. 2022).

Social media platforms have also become a safe space for many adolescents to consume sexual content. This is especially true for members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) community. Berger et al. (2022) found that on average, LGBTQ+ youth spend more time on social media than their straight counterparts. This is mostly due to the sense of community they find on social media platforms. Social media offers connections that these youth do not have access to offline. Though too much time spent on social media can lead to feelings of

loneliness and sensitivity, according Berger et al. (2022) social media can often improve the mental well-being of LGBTQ+ youth.

Adolescents will often turn to social media because they find it easy to access. Those who choose to learn about sex from social media often find these platforms easy to navigate. Typically, those who are searching for sexual health information on social media have more sex-positive perspectives (Olamijuwon and Odimegwu 2021).

With people's reliance on social media for real-life information, it's important that the information they find is accurate. In one survey, participants reported that they did not find Facebook a suitable outlet for serious discussion, but they also reported using the platform for exactly that purpose (Gurgun et al. 2023). The issue of misinformation is true across platforms. In a critical analysis of educational health content on Tik Tok, physicians found a majority of the videos to be poor quality and inaccurate (Li et al. 2024). And while social media is marketed as a place to express oneself freely, most users do not report or correct misinformation when they come across it on online platforms (Gurgun et al. 2023).

Even though many find social media platforms helpful for sex education, platforms are restrictive in what they allow to be posted. In recent years, apps such as Instagram and Tumblr have released stricter policies on the sexual content allowed on their platforms. This trend is known as "deplatforming sex." In deplatforming sex, these apps are leaving it out of the online social arena and reinforcing the stigmatization of sexual conversation and activity. Of course, there are other apps created specifically for sex, fetish, and kink (i.e. Grindr and Fetlife). However, these platforms are significantly less mainstream (Paasonen et al. 2023).

YouTube

YouTube is a more democratized outlet than television, as anyone is able to upload videos outside of a network system. Also due to the nature of the YouTube platform, videos are community building, and encourage active participation (Johnston 2017).

YouTube became a popular outlet for many LGBTQ+ youth to explore their identities, particularly with the rise of queer influencers. The influencer lifestyle was developed in the early 2000s. A typical influencer shares lifestyle narratives, political and social justice opinions, among other aspects of their identity. For queer influencers, LGBTQ+ advocacy is often central to their online personas (Abidin 2019).

The YouTube format is also incredibly welcoming to youth who are looking for a mentor. Many YouTubers film videos from their homes and address their audience warmly. Though YouTube videos are pre-recorded audiovisuals, they tend to feel more personalized and current than other mediums. Videographers are able to respond directly to their audiences via the comment section on the YouTube website. It is not uncommon for YouTubers to take requests for later video content from their fans (Johnston 2017).

Laci Green and Dr. Lindsey Doe are two YouTubers who produce sexual education videos. Laci Green's channel, previously titled *Sex Plus*, has 1.33 million subscribers. Green has since changed her channel to her name. She also no longer produces videos on YouTube; the last one was uploaded a year ago. Despite these changes, her sex education videos are still available on her page. Green's filming style is a lot different from Doe's. She tends to record in her bedroom and address her viewers in a more affectionate tone, while Doe typically aims for a more professional presentation.

Green's videos take on a more casual nature, and she often uses her own experiences as inspiration for her videos. This style establishes her as a relatable creator. Green also leverages

her experiences to establish her authority on the subjects discussed. This, coupled with her aesthetic editing skills, helps to cultivate her success as a sex education YouTuber.

Dr. Doe's channel is titled *Sexplanations* and has 1.09 million subscribers. Her videos are attention-grabbing and silly, yet she is still able to communicate health information to her audience. In some ways, videos like these are similar to the sitcom format; however, they are more focused on diffusing accurate information. Dr. Doe often records her videos from her office, which is filled with books on sex. The decorations in her office are also very sex-based, which speaks to her sex positive personality.

Some of Dr. Doe's videos are clearly more for entertainment than information. For example, she recently posted a video titled "Does this Bridge Make You Horny?" However, many of her videos are incredibly informative and inclusive, such as her videos titled: "Sex & Autism" and "Testicle Trivia." The titles of her videos are incredibly enticing, and so are the thumbnails.

Dr. Doe also discusses topics surrounding safe sex on her channel. Some of her videos may be harder for viewers to watch, so she is careful to include trigger warnings. Some of the more difficult topics she has taken on include: pedophiles, sex offender registries, and responding to abuse. Though these videos may be less entertaining and marketable, they do provide a lot of advice that mainstream media does not provide.

Videos and channels like these are part of a trend referred to as "edutainment." Just as it sounds, edutainment describes a genre where entertainment and education meet. With the rise of edutainment, there is a new trend to prioritize both simultaneously (Johnston 2017).

Podcast

The podcast is a developing medium that originally stems from radio. At its core it is innovative and avant-garde. Podcasts are a highly accessible medium. They are relatively easy to create and relatively easy to download or stream (Rime, Pike, and Collins 2022).

Podcasts are usually episodical, which is key to the nature of its consumption. Podcasts manage to balance between independent and mainstream, depending on the creators and topics involved. For example, *Serial* is a podcast that premiered in 2014 as a spinoff to the popular radio show, *This American Life*. *Serial* is an example of a mainstream podcast, and is actually attributed to bringing a lot of new consumers to the podcast medium (Rime 2022).

Parasocial relationships are common for podcast listeners, as it is a more intimate format. Podcast-listening is highly customizable, which allows for the user to feel a more personal connection to what they are consuming. There is intentionality in choosing a podcast to listen to, unlike radio, which has pre-established stations. With this, there is typically an attitude of "looking to expand one's worldview" when listening to podcasts (Perks and Turner 2018:106).

Sex-positive, educational podcasts such as *Call Her Daddy* and *Better in Bed* became popular in the ever-growing podcast ecosystem. For this paper, I listened to a few episodes of *Better in Bed*, a podcast by Sara Tang, a certified sex coach and educator. In some of her episodes she just talks about a topic that she expects her listeners to find interesting and informative, like her episode "The Healing Practice of Yoni Massage." Other times, Tang brings on guests and has engaging conversations about topics that are typically too taboo to exist in mainstream media. In an episode titled "Exploring Prostate Play," Tang invites a male-bodied friend of hers to speak about his experiences with prostate play. The hour-long conversation they have is informative from a biological standpoint, but it also works to destigmatize the act of prostate play, which is often negatively associated with querness. The relationship between the

two speakers adds to the intrigue of the episode, and entertains the listener. Even while detailing the safety aspects of prostate play, Tang keeps her show light-hearted and easy to listen to. Podcasting is such a democratized medium that it creates subcultures that allow for this type of open conversation.

Websites

Outside of specific apps, the internet has generally become an authoritative source of information. Websites allow people of all ages to access sexual material and information. Easy access to content such as pornography has been a cause of moral panic for many older generations (Etheredge 2016).

Unsurprisingly, as does most mediated content, websites often hold biased narratives and resources. Marques et al. (2015) performed a content analysis of fourteen sexual health websites. Here are some statistics to summarize their findings: 15% of the websites had information on pregnancy and STI/HIV prevention. 10% provided information on sexual behaviors (i.e. masturbation, oral sex, anal sex, vaginal sex, toys, etc.). 10% gave space for the discussion of psychosocial factors. 9% included biological information. 4% provided materials on pregnancy outside of prevention tactics. 3% of the websites mentioned sexual pleasure. Only 2% had any discussion of sexual violence (physical, emotional, or psychological).

These statistics are helpful, but they do not speak to the attitudes of the information found on these sites. In another content analysis done by Aubrey et al. (2020), experts found that out of the 400 college sexual health center pages they studied, the majority of them placed the responsibility of sexual health practices on women. When talking about the pleasurable aspects of sex, a more cautionary tone was used to address women visiting the site (gender addressed was analyzed by genitalia referenced) (Marques et al. 2015). Web pages that were directed

towards women were more detailed than those designed for men (Aubrey et al. 2020). This method of sharing sexual health content is heteronormative and sexist.

Outside of educational websites, the internet has also allowed easy access to pornography– which can often also be used for educational purposes, perhaps to the detriment of the user. Interestingly, when asking users about the negative effects of pornography, people tend to say that it has a worse effect on others rather than themselves (Döring 2009).

The Importance of These Representations

As argued throughout this paper, mainstream media has an unimaginable impact on structuring social schema and personal identity. "The media are capable of shaping the collective imagination in the long term, giving prominence to some issues and frames over others" (Araujo and Argiñano 2021:1). With that said, the common, negative representations of marginalized groups in popular media can be detrimental to the individuals that feel they are misrepresented (Ward 2004).

Race

Black Americans in the 15-24 age group account for the biggest portion of new STI cases. This disparity stays the same when controlling for risky sexual behaviors (i.e. unprotected sexual acts) (Banks et al. 2020). Female-bodied Black Americans have unplanned pregnancies at a higher rate as well. While disparities exist even with the use of protection, risky sexual behaviors are a prominent issue within the Black community. Distress and negative feelings have been tied to a higher likelihood of unprotected sex (Whiteley et al. 2011).

Race and immigration status can work together to create barriers for safe sex practices. In one study, Sharma, Lacombe-Duncan, and Sallabank (2023) found that Asian immigrants living in the United States were less likely to get tested for STIs regularly. Many migrants coming from less wealthy countries struggle with support networks when they move, which becomes a key factor in accessing health care.

Representations of people of color in mainstream media does not help these disparities. Although the number of black characters on television has been steadily increasing since the

1950s, black people are still largely underrepresented in mainstream programming. Plus, even when black characters are included, they are often in lesser roles (Ward 2004). While black people are becoming more commonly represented, queer black people are still erased from the mainstream narrative (Cruz 2020). One issue with these narratives, as highlighted by Saha (2024), is the dichotomy between positive and negative representations. To provide only one without the other is reductive. In reality, all identities experience a flux of positive and negative experiences, and this should be reflected in popular representations.

Misrepresentations cause consumers of color mental and social distress, which are risk factors for unprotected sex. Media has direct influence on people's choices and lifestyles, and the way people of color are represented condones unhealthy behaviors for these groups.

Earlier in this paper, I introduced *Pose* as a television show that provides deeper representations of the complications and hardships that come with being sexually active, especially compared to mainstream sitcoms. While it is crucial that our media tells the difficult stories and properly spreads awareness of the possible outcomes of sexual acts, it is common for people of color to carry the burden of these more difficult stories.

Finally, I would like to note that narratives are constantly changing. Radical representations for one generation might age to become stereotypical or reductive in another. Proper representation of marginalized groups is constantly in flux and an ongoing process (Saha 2024).

Gender

Gender is highly influential in learning about sex. In general, men are less likely to critique sexual imagery in media, which usually centers women in misogynistic and objectifying ways (Pinkleton et al. 2008). Incidentally, the emphasis on protecting oneself from sexualization

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and sexual violence is placed on women (Ballam and Granello 2011). The responsibility placed on women also manages to uphold a dichotomy in which women are either seen as victims or sluts (Eckeredge 2016).

As Aubrey et al. (2020) found in their analysis of college sexual health web pages, women are expected to also have the information surrounding safe sex, and men do not have to worry. Because of this expectation, Aubrey et al. (2020) also found that men were a lot less likely to know where to access sexual health resources on a college campus. Additionally, men in focus groups expressed that they did not remember much from sex education, as they expected women to be more responsible for that type of information (Aubrey et al. 2020). So, the ways in which websites and other mediums frame sexual health and who is or is not responsible for it translates to actual behaviors and attitudes.

On television, men are typically the initiators of sexual activities (Sapolsky et al. 2012). And, on college health websites, men's bodies were depicted as robust and resilient (Aubrey et al. 2020). Both of these representations of male bodies maintain ideals of hegemonic masculinity, which is harmful to people of any gender and body type. The expectation that women provide sexual health information while men provide the perfect body is an unfair and unrealistic standard.

So far, this section has only discussed cisgender individuals who identify on the binary. Due to cisnormativity (the assumption that everyone identifies with the sex they were assigned at birth), trans, non-binary, and two-spirit people experience a lot of discrimination in clinical spaces (Stewart et al. 2022). Transgender people of all identities are especially vulnerable to HIV and STIs, as they spread among the queer community, with limited health interventions. It is common for transgender women to have higher rates of HIV than queer, cisgender men

(McNulty and Bourne 2017). Many trans-identifying patients face barriers to their healthcare due to their identity. Sexual health clinics are often segregated by gender, which can be a challenging system to navigate for someone who is non-binary or transgender. Additionally, trans patients often feel discriminated against, or responsible for their own care. Most doctors are not educated in trans medicine, forcing trans-identifying patients to do their own research and assist their own interventions (Stewart et al. 2022).

These disparities make sense, when analyzing the resources given to trans people of all identities. Most college health sites do not provide any information for trans students, and if they do, it is limited (Aubrey et al. 2020). Not to mention the minimal representations trans people get in mainstream media, coupled with often negative and tragic depictions (Cruz 2020).

Sexuality

Men who have sex with men have a higher STI rate than people who exclusively have sex with women. One main reason for this is the limited access to testing and care. To avoid discrimination or uncomfortable confrontations, many queer men opt to administer their own tests, but this is challenging and has a lower accuracy rate (Kuladhan 2022). In a study by Sharma et al. (2023), many queer men reported that they avoid testing because they are concerned with issues of privacy and confidentiality, homophobia, and often have limited access to healthcare. Additionally, queer men are afraid of the consequences of a positive result, as this leads to further stigmatization and alienation within and beyond their own communities.

Pornography use is much more prevalent for queer people– particularly homosexual men and bisexual females. The representations present in pornography do not accurately demonstrate health outcomes that could stem from unprotected sexual relations, which disproportionately affects queer people (Döring 2009). In a study that surveyed queer men who did not seek STI

testing, 49% said they believed they were not vulnerable to contracting STIs (Kuladadhan 2022).

Many queer men believe that if they are in a relationship, they have a low risk for STI, but in

fact, between one and two thirds of HIV transmissions happen in relationships (Sharma et al.

2023).

Religion

Mainstream media tends to frame religion as an anti-sexual force, which is not

necessarily accurate. It is true that nearly all religions have some formal guidelines to regulate

sexual acts or sexuality, and many value abstinence and castigate homosexuality (Tsuria and

Bartashius 2023). Religion can be central to the lives of many, especially Black and Hispanic

families. Ritchwood et al. (2017) looks at the effects religiosity has on communications about

sex in Black families. They found that caregivers who had a more positive view on sex initiation

were more likely to teach adolescents about the positive aspects of sexuality. Greater religiosity

was correlated to a more negative perspective on sex initiation. However, religiosity did not

indicate a caregiver would be against general sexual health communications. Generally,

caregivers agreed on the importance of general sexual health interventions.

The rise of the internet and digital media further complicates the relationship between

religion and sex (Tsuria and Bartashius 2023). Earlier in this paper, I provided a brief history of

the Hays Code. The Hays Code was endorsed, and often motivated by the Catholic church. Will

H. Hays himself was Catholic, and developed the Code with those religious principles in mind.

Therefore, religion is deeply embedded into the history of the United States' cinema landscape

(Doherty 2017). Though this analysis is specific to the United States, many other countries had

similar religious motivations to censor their films. For example, the Bollywood India's Central

Board of Film Certification promoted censorship due to the perceived influence of television and film (Tsuria and Bartashius 2023).

As I have mentioned in previous sections, the internet has provided community for many LGBTQ+ individuals. This is especially true for those living in religious societies where their access to queer communities and spaces to express their sexuality is limited. Similarly, social media has provided platforms for survivors to speak out against sexual abuses they have experienced in the church. During the impactful #MeToo movement, there was a sub-movement, #ChurchToo (Tsuria and Bartashius 2023).

Age

Sex education and interventions are essential for young people, as they have an increased risk for STIs and unplanned pregnancies (Olamijuwon and Odimegwu 2021). In a 2010 study, Ballam and Granello (2011) found that three out of every ten teenagers would get pregnant before the age of twenty. In this same study, a majority of teenagers that reported having sex said they wish they had waited.

Mukambika (2023) argues that it is necessary for children to learn the difference between appropriate and inappropriate touch, as they are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence. When interviewing guardians and teachers, Mukambika (2023) found that sex education for children is controversial. Guardians did not want their children exposed to sex education in primary grades, and teachers did not want to teach it to them. Most often, the reasons for this were cultural and religious values. Many caregivers for adolescents simply refuse to engage in conversation about sex (Richwood et al. 2017).

In terms of adolescents learning about sex, a 2002 survey demonstrated that parents from high socioeconomic backgrounds were more likely to talk about contraceptive use and safe sex than those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Ballam and Granello 2011).

Amateur, online pornography has become more popular with the rise of the internet. Children are at risk as both subjects and viewers of online pornography. Though child pornography is illegal in most Western countries, it still exists in closed circles. Plus, legal types of pornography are available for easy access on the web, which puts it within reach of children (Döring 2009). Without a guardian to talk to, pornography can leave children with unanswered questions and unhealthy ideas and attitudes about sex.

When children are taught about sex, a binary typically forms between innocence or contamination. Children that are viewed as "contaminated" are typically victims of early sexualization or abuse. Those who are innocent are unaware of sexual behavior. This dichotomy is unfair to children, as it shames them for their experiences (Etheredge 2016).

White et al. (2023) asserts that sexual scripts are key to young adults' understandings of sex. Sexual scripts are meant to help individuals evaluate their desires and engage in behaviors that coincide with these desires. However, sexual scripts also reinforce societal expectations surrounding sexuality. So, for marginalized groups, sexual scripts can lead to low self-esteem and can ultimately impact sexual wellbeing. Sexual scripts dictate what an appropriate or realistic sexual encounter should look like. Parents, peers, and the media all feed into a person's sexual script. Sex-positive media content is correlated with healthier sexual scripts.

White et al. (2023) also found that parents typically focused more on sexual risks than sex positivity when discussing their children's sex lives. Perhaps for this reason, parents do not have a major role in cultivating a child's sex-positive script.

A Holistic Understanding

The biopsychosocial model is most often used in healthcare settings, but it is relevant to the ideas in this paper, as sex-positivity is a part of healthcare. This useful model takes into account a person's biological, psychological, and social circumstances when making observations, suggestions, and decisions. The goal of this model is to provide comprehensive health interventions that uplift quality of life and patient satisfaction (Nimbi et al. 2021).

More generally, on the topic of intersectionality, it is important to take a more holistic perspective when attempting to understand a person and their needs. Taking the biopsychosocial model and pairing it with values from the sex positivity movement creates the ideal outcome– understanding a person on an individual level, free of stereotype, stigma, expectation, and boundaries. The biopsychosocial approach and sex positivity are two tools that can help promote a healthy sex life. With them, we are able to recognize individual sexual expressions as valid, healthy, and meaningful.

As a culture, we do not consider sex as part of our body's health as much as we consider other aspects of our lives. In reality, living in a situation where we do not feel comfortable advocating for our own sexual health can affect our physical health in a myriad of ways (Nimbi et al. 2021).

Kinky behaviors are highly stigmatized, causing those who practice them distress and shame. One should not have to feel this way about their embodied experiences when they are acting completely consensually (Nimbi et al. 2021).

Ultimately, sex is an intimate and embodied experience. Though there are infinite ways to have sex and express sexuality, the body is at the core. So, when analyzing sexual content and trends in popular media, it is important to recognize the ways the body is represented.

Public Health and Stigma

For individuals to feel comfortable accessing healthcare, they must be able to communicate comfortably with professionals. With sexual health, it is important that patients are comfortable asking for contraceptives and STI testing and treatments (Scull et al. 2022). Those who already feel marginalized by healthcare professionals will not seek out services if they have to deal with stigma, which ultimately creates further inequities in health outcomes (Bond and Radix 2011).

Throughout this paper, I have mentioned sex-positivity. Its counterpart, sex-negativity, is associated with prejudices linked to various sex practices and groups (Nimbi et al. 2022). Women, queer people, transgender people, and people of color are all victims of forms of sexual stigmatization. Discussing sex as if it is shameful (i.e. whispering or using innuendos) reinforces the stigma tied to the topic (Nimbi et al. 2022).

Approaches to sex education too often characterize sexual behaviors as risk factors, and do not spend nearly as much time on the pleasure aspects of sex. However, combining conversations about pleasure, sexual health, and STI prevention has worked to create and maintain safe sex practices among marginalized groups. This strategy has also been shown to improve knowledge and attitudes around sex and condom use (Bond and Radix 2023). Furthermore, using sex-positive and inclusive, non-normative language is important during health interventions. In order for marginalized groups to feel included in their own health care, these smaller linguistic changes are essential to represent and promote everyone's identity and sexual behavior (Nimbi et al. 2022). In order to make actual changes in the health and teaching industry, healthcare professionals need to be aware of patients' circumstances and past

experiences and pay attention to their own biases, whether implicit or explicit (Bond and Radix

2023).

Part Two: Media Literacy

Chapter Three: Definitions and Impacts of Media Literacy

Definition and Relevance

Media literacy teaches students how to think critically about the media they consume. Media literacy programs focus on the methods and goals of media construction. Health literacy relies on media literacy, as media affects consumers' decision making (Nelson et al. 2016). Multiple studies have shown that media literacy is tied to reduced intentions towards risky health behavior (Scull et al. 2022). When asked, young adults were aware of the fact that media affects their decision making (Pinkleton et al. 2012).

In general, decision making is a learned skill. Practicing critical thinking can help people make healthier decisions (Austin et al. 2015). Media literacy interventions encourage students to evaluate the accuracy and intent of the media they consume. Pinkleton et al. (2012) found that after media literacy training, participants tended to have a less-idealized, more fact-based understanding of how media operates. Particularly for adolescents, who are already more likely to engage in risky behavior, media literacy training is crucial (Vahedi, Sibalis, and Sutherland 2018).

Pinkleton et al. (2012) found that adolescents find the actions of attractive television and film characters desirable, and are likely to imitate them. This is perhaps why adolescents exposed to sexual media content are at an increased risk for early sexual activity (Austin et al. 2015).

Currently, there is an unproductive dichotomy between the way sex is discussed in classrooms and in popular media. Guardians and educators need to bridge this gap by including lessons about media rather than attempting to ignore its graphic depictions (Ballam and Granello 2011).

In contexts outside of sex, media literacy training has been effective. According to Pinkelton et al. (2012), a population of third graders found media literacy training useful, as they were better able to understand the persuasive aspects of what they were consuming. Even with this training, participants still find their media enjoyable, in some cases even more so. However, despite finding it enjoyable, receivers of media literacy training are not likely to make poor decisions that mimic those of desirable media personalities (Pinkleton et al. 2012).

Within the context of sex education, media literacy training has reportedly allowed adolescents to gain a more accurate perception of sexual norms, and many ended up with more positive attitudes about postponing sex (Pinkleton et al. 2012).

Even if media literacy is not immediately available to all adolescents, that age group often listens to their peers. So, providing more media literacy can help to change overall attitudes towards media representations of sex and cause everyone to think more critically (Pinkleton et al. 2008).

In Practice

Currently, sex education courses most often inform students on sexual anatomy, sexual behaviors, reproduction, abstinence, birth control, and emotional relations (Mukambika 2023). These lessons do not often include analysis of gender roles, the signs of a healthy or unhealthy relationship, or any discussion of sexual violence (Scull et al. 2022). Reframing these sex education classes to instead be about sexuality education would warrant a change that includes all of the topics left out of current sex education curriculums. Other teachings in sexuality education could include sexual preferences, religion, cultural values, family tradition, history, and parenthood, as well as health interventions (Mukambika 2023).

Already, this paper has argued that the exclusion of meaningful topics in school and at home has forced children and adolescents to search for answers online and in popular media. Even with the addition of new topics into school curriculums, media has become a "super peer" that informs emerging adults on unspoken norms and social interactions (Scull et al. 2022).

If we were to educate adolescents about media, they would become active, informed, and discriminating participants in the communication process rather than passive receivers of information that is not necessarily accurate (Nelson et al. 2016). Once media literate, one might recognize the desirable aspects of media content, but will be better able to recognize the fictionalized portions that reflect the goals of the message producers who have created this content with the purpose of creating a spectacle (Austin et al. 2015).

Scull et al. (2022) examined the effects of a media literacy program called *Media Aware*. *Media Aware* is an internet-based comprehensive sexual health education program that promotes critical thinking about media portrayals of sex acts. Scull et al. (2022) found that *Media Aware* allowed students to more critically process advertisements using sex appeal to promote their products. Adolescents that went through training found the advertisements less realistic.

Media Aware was also effective in deconstructing norms and biases. For example, the program reduced young women's normative beliefs about how many of their peers were sexually active. Young men and women also corrected their beliefs on how many teenagers engage in risky sexual behaviors. So, this accessible media literacy program achieved many of its goals, and users reported having good experiences (Scull et al. 2022).

For Future

Many media scholars would like to make media literacy education universally available, similar to print literacy. With this ideal, media would be present in every classroom (Rogow

2004). Ideally, children would start to learn about media in late childhood and continue to grow their understanding through early adolescence. Health curriculums would be another key space for media literacy to be taught at school (Vahedi 2018). Providing film and television examples in sex education can provide concrete evidence of meaningful representations of sex. Using popular culture as a pedagogical tool is to the advantage of students and educators, as it is ever-present in classrooms. Ignoring popular media in health interventions is counter-productive at this point in time (Johnston 2017).

At the beginning of this paper, I made an intentional statement about my ongoing attempt at inclusive and sex-positive language. Again, I would like to acknowledge the faults of the sex-positive framework, as it is deeply rooted in privileged perspectives, but at the same time, it is useful for its de-stigmatization of pleasurable sex acts.

Using inclusive, sex-positive language helps people navigate conversations about responsibility without creating shame. White et al. (2023) uses sexual script theory to explain the internalized beliefs, perceptions, and meaning of sex as constructed by societal discourses and representations.

Chapter Four: My Project

Intentions

According to Pinkleton et al. (2008) adolescents are more likely to find a source credible if they relate to it. For this reason, peers have had a higher success rate of educating adolescents than authority figures.

Taking this to heart, and wanting to make a tangible difference in the media literacy landscape, I decided to organize conversations among my peers. I wanted to intentionally create a space on campus where students could talk about their experiences with sex education and media representations of sex free of stigma. My hope was that the students in the space would learn from one another and the shared experience, but I also wanted to inform them of some of my research. My desire was to disseminate some of the research I have done in an engaging way. As college students, we do not always want to read essays and papers. There is something powerful about sitting in a room and focusing on other's voices without an authority figure guiding us or grading us.

In a systematic review, Neelan et al. (2023) found that traditional sexual health interventions were good for improving attitudes, perceptions, knowledge, and intentions, but they were not as good at changing actual behaviors. I am hoping that engaging in generative conversations inspires my peers to make tangible changes.

I liked this idea, but it still did not feel like enough. I wanted to limit the conversations to small groups so that everyone could feel seen and heard. But I was conflicted, because I also wanted to reach a larger audience. So, I came up with the idea of creating a podcast. The podcast will be a publicly accessible recording of the conversations I have with students.

Method

After receiving approval from Vassar College's Institutional Review Board, I spread the word about my project by creating posters and posting them in the living spaces and popular communal areas on campus. I also created miniature handouts that I passed around in classes and left on tables in common areas.

Students interested in participating in the podcast were asked to fill out a questionnaire. The questions were designed to filter out those under the age of eighteen and those who might judge others in the space. I will provide a copy of the questions at the end of this section.

There was only one person whom I chose not to follow up with for discretionary reasons. For all of the others (a total of sixteen), I sent an email to figure out scheduling. Only eleven got back to me. Based on availability, I created two groups of four and one group of three.

I reserved a recording space on campus, which is where I met the participants. Everyone who participated had to sign an audio consent form and choose a pseudonym that was used during the recording of the podcast.

Based on my research, I tried to create questions and conversation starters that would cultivate meaningful and productive conversations around the biggest topics in this paper. At the same time, I wanted to curate a natural conversation, so I altered the questions to accommodate the participants and their shared experiences. I see the podcast as a companion to this paper.

Reflection

Rich (2004) asserts that media literacy is not just about the ability to understand media, but the ability to make it as well. If we are to treat media literacy as we do literature classes, this argument makes sense. Students do not just learn how to read, they learn how to write.

In creating my podcast, I allowed my peers to join me in media-making. We created a podcast to reflect on our experiences with sex education and media messaging. Everyone in the

room became an active participant, which is the goal in media literacy interventions. That said, it is important to have ongoing conversations on the topics of this paper.

I was excited to find that so many of my peers' experiences matched the research I have been doing for the past few months. Many participants shared dissatisfaction with abstinence-only or limited sex education curriculums. LGBTQ+ information was often left out of classrooms, and shared on online platforms instead. People spoke about the positive and negative aspects of having sexual content available online. These conflicting perspectives echoed the same arguments I have outlined in this paper. Early exposure to pornography and explicit content caused confusion and discomfort for many of the people in my podcast. However, these same people found the internet and social media to be helpful resources in learning about topics that are not taught in the classroom.

Earlier in this paper, I stated that people tend to attribute the negative effects of internet usage to others rather than themselves (Döring 2009). I feel that this is important to acknowledge when understanding the narratives that were shared in my podcast. So, while I am grateful for everyone who shared their perspectives and I found them truly informative, I do have to wonder how much they are affected in ways they do not recognize. I believe we are all a lot more affected by the media we consume than we realize.

All in all, I am really glad I decided to create this podcast. Many of the participants thanked me afterwards and told me what the conversations meant for them. Some of them had never explicitly thought about the topics I brought up, and this podcast was a reflective space for them.

Here is a link to the podcast:

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLq41Mn9AncT_Rcpn87BqMe8jB5X-Iz1Ae

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