In a 2013 video for *Essence Magazine* online, relationships editors Charrea Jackson and Charlie Penn stand on the streets of Harlem with a large sign requesting: “Let’s Talk About Sex.”¹ From the start, their questions to women passerby are met with embarrassed laughter and the congenial giggles of fun, scandalous girl talk. Featuring women young and old, the interviewers pose questions such as “When was your last orgasm?” and “Tell me your biggest fantasy.” Finally, Penn and Jackson reach their last question: “Do you bring your own condoms – do you practice your own safe sex – or do you rely on the man to have them?” Without hesitation or a hint of shyness, all responses are a variation of “Yes, absolutely!” or “Yes, of course!” After showing various interviewees’ explanations, the video closes on one interviewee’s comment: “Be careful and be safe, and use protection at all times.”

*Essence’s* video exemplifies a popular trend in sexual health advocacy: the use of personal sex confessions. The World Health Organization defines sexual health as “a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence.”² Sex education necessitates talking about sex, and healthy sexual practices require communication with your

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¹ “Essence Love Squad Talks About Sex” [http://realestate.aol.com/blog/videos/real-estate/518160515/](http://realestate.aol.com/blog/videos/real-estate/518160515/)

partner and your doctor. In part, personal confession is a way of dispelling the sense of awkwardness, secrecy and shame surrounding sexuality so that we can get talking and foster more informed, safe, and fulfilling sexual practices. On the other hand, the taboo on sharing personal sex stories is precisely what makes them sell. As the giggles in *Essence’s* video demonstrate, sex talk is entertaining, especially when it borders on a scandalous overshare. In this way, confessions are an effective vehicle for spreading a health advocate’s message and a profitable venture for businesses like *Essence Magazine*. In this paper, I will outline a few cases of sexual confession videos created in the name of sexual health advocacy and analyze the ways in which their flirtation with the taboo plays a key role in bolstering the video’s message and success.

A basic value of health advocacy confession videos is that they lead by example. “Let’s Talk about Sex” is a title that crops up throughout sexual health media pieces, from the CDC’s PSA on STDs to a New York Times’ article on sex education. In addition to being a catchy Salt-n-Pepa reference, “Let’s Talk about Sex” is a popular phrase because it gets to the heart of the problem: talking about sex is awkward. Sexual health advocates often put themselves forth as exemplars of the mature, unabashed approach we should all take towards sexual health conversations. For instance, Planned Parenthood describes their YouTube channel A Naked Notion, starring sex educator Laci Green, as “a sex information project dedicated to frank, open conversations about sexuality,” and a common theme in the channel’s videos is the importance

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3 “Let’s Talk about Sexual Health,” YouTube video, 5:08, posted by Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), November 30, 2012. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dvmb9eUu0p4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dvmb9eUu0p4)

of viewers having frank, open conversations about sex in their personal lives.\(^5\) “Getting over that embarrassing little hump of talking about it out loud can do wonders for your sex life,” says Green.\(^6\)

However, Laci Green’s easy discussion of sexuality is situated in the context of an expert talking to an audience interested in her field of knowledge. Her “frank, open conversations” about general sex information are a world away from the “frank, open conversations” she encourages among her viewers, which are much more intimate and personal. The same can be said of Lindsey Doe’s popular YouTube channel Sexplanations.\(^7\) While Doe, a sexologist with a doctorate in human sexuality, often emphasizes the importance of communication, her own discussion of sexuality is clinical, scholarly and general. On the occasion that Green or Doe do connect the discussion to themselves (as when Laci mentions in her video on birth control that she uses an IUD), their disclosure is located within the highly appropriate space of a channel set aside to talk about sex. In other words, their context as sex education channels and sexual health professionals weaken the direct applicability of their confessions to the communicative hurdles in the lives of their viewers. By contrast, YouTube vloggers (video bloggers) whose channels are not focused on sexual health are in a rich position to lead by example when it comes to tackling embarrassment.

One vlogger who has chosen to promote sexual health through confession is twenty-two-year-old Carrie Hope Fletcher. Fletcher is an English musician, writer, and musical theater actress. Her YouTube channel It’s Way Past My Bed Time has over 560,000 subscribers and is

\(^5\) “A Naked Notion,” Planned Parenthood, 2015, http://www.plannedparenthood.org/planned-parenthood-northern-new-england/a-naked-notion?gclid=Cj0KEQwklurB9DwoZf1bGCxocBEiQAmcsem6O9IEummFbKf75FGKKA5mg8T3X-IhdOlJa3B56$c8aAQBJ8P8HAQ


\(^7\) Lindsey Doe, “Sexplanations with Dr. Doe,” YouTube, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/user/sexplanations
primarily dedicated to sharing stories from her life, often culminating in life advice. In her video “Let’s Talk about Sexual Health: Getting Tested,”\(^8\) Fletcher recounts getting tested for STIs for the first time earlier that week. She clarifies that she had no symptoms, but that any sexually active person is at risk and she wanted “peace of mind.” She begins as follows:

> Sexual health is hugely important, but it’s one of these subjects that everyone treats as taboo and it’s embarrassing to talk about it. Especially in Britain where we have this whole stiff upper lip attitude where we’re like, “No, you can’t talk about sex. It’s too inappropriate and embarrassing and we should just leave it all together and just be quiet about the whole thing.” And I completely disagree with that attitude towards talking about sex. If we just have these conversations openly and honestly, I feel like a lot more people would be better informed and therefore safer and healthier.

Despite her proclaimed belief that sex is nothing to be secretive about, Fletcher admits that walking the talk is challenging: “I thought going to the clinic and getting tested was going to be one of the most embarrassing experiences of my life… I was preparing myself for the worst.” This feeling makes her more relatable to the target audience: those who share her embarrassment. It also shows that the shyness we may feel about sex can prevent healthy practices beyond communication. She explicitly states that the reason she is making this video is so that her viewers are aware that testing is important and so that “it might encourage some of you guys to go and get tested too if you’ve been putting it off or you feel embarrassed about it, or worst case scenario, you’ve actually got symptoms and you’re too embarrassed to tell anyone about them.” The remainder of the video is dedicated to telling her viewers how wonderful the clinic was: easy to navigate, friendly staff, and not embarrassing at all.

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\(^8\) Carrie Hope Fletcher, “Let’s Talk About Sexual Health: Getting Tested,” YouTube video, 6:47, posted by ItsWayPastMyBedTime, January 13, 2015, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kHqDBvLxPNM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kHqDBvLxPNM)
While her overall experience was cheerful, Fletcher encourages the audience’s empathy by emphasizing her sense of ignorance and bewilderment. She tells of walking up to the receptionist and asking, “Hi, I’m really sorry, I’ve not been here before. I wanna get checked out. How do I go about doing this?” At the end of the visit, she asks the nurse, “This might be a really stupid question, but is there anything else I need to do while I’m here?” Most notably, Fletcher’s positive experience has not magically evaporated her sense of embarrassment about sex. One of the main reasons “the Dean Street clinic was incredible” was because its technology allowed for an unusually private process. She praises their silent touchscreen, saying it asked “all of the uncomfortable questions I was dreading answering. I was so relieved and so thankful that I didn’t have to answer these questions face to face with another human being.” Another touch screen on the wall of a private room played a tutorial for her on how to carry out the swab test herself, “without having to go through the embarrassment of showing someone my foof. I was in heaven.” Still, the key message is that Fletcher gathered her courage and visited the clinic even before she knew such privacy would be available. She is careful to note that, “Even though not all clinics are gonna be like the Dean Street Express, they’re still there to care for and help you and they will still be completely confidential and nonjudgmental.”

Fletcher’s confession may seem mild in comparison to Essence’s questions on sexual fantasy and orgasm. But to Fletcher, and likely to thousands of her viewers, the admission that she was tested for STIs is far from innocuous. She explains, “Another thing that I was worried about prior to getting tested was that I would be judged.” She was relieved to find instead that the people were friendly and they “made me feel like I was welcome to go back whenever I wanted.” She also had to remind herself not to be embarrassed in front of the other visitors because “you guys are all here for the same reason.” It is safe to say that if Fletcher was anxious
of being judged by staff and fellow visitors for attending the clinic, then posting a public video about her visit for thousands of strangers to see likely caused some discomfort as well. From early on in the video, she claims that it is important to have “these conversations,” as in the conversation she is having with her viewers, even though they “are a little bit embarrassing and a little bit cringe-worthy.” In short, Fletcher’s sexual health video is a prime example of how a confession can lead by example, showing viewers that it is normal to be embarrassed, and that overcoming those feelings is doable and important.

Laci Green’s confidence in sexual discussions does not lend itself to the same type of confession, but she has nonetheless created a number of videos that incorporate self-disclosure with different merits. For one, her casual, quick mentions of personal connections to the topic at hand treat the information as unremarkable, thereby driving home the message that sex is truly not shameful more convincingly than Fletcher’s “this is embarrassing, but we can do it” attitude. For instance, in her Naked Notion video “COMIN’ OUT! (Bisexuality),” Green explains the different forms of coming out, their benefits, how to manage risks, and the particular challenges in coming out as bisexual. The video is three minutes and thirty seconds, of which only ten seconds are spent talking about her own sexuality, once she is already two minutes in. Green does not overtly “announce” her bisexuality, but rather weaves it seamlessly into her monologue as though it holds no more weight than the impersonal advice and information in the rest of the video:

Of course, make sure you’re doing it for you. When I was younger, I definitely felt some pressure to come out as bi and to prove that I was, you know, a ‘real’ bisexual, like it was something that I

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owed to other people. Secret time: I didn’t know shit and neither do you. So don’t be afraid to take your time and do it when it feels right for you.

The videos from Green that do focus on personal revelations as their central content are ones that involve a guest. Notably, none such videos exist on her Planned Parenthood channel, A Naked Notion. Instead, they can be found on her less formal original channel, LaciGreen, which has over 1,200,000 subscribers and is dedicated to sex education.

One value of having a guest confession is that celebrity guests can bring in viewers who were not originally searching for sex education content. In one video, Laci interviews writer and former child star Mara Wilson, from hit nineties films like *Matilda* and *Mrs. Doubtfire*. The video covers how Wilson learned about sex in school, how she was sexualized in the public eye as she grew up, and what it was like losing her virginity. The tone of the video purposefully rejects the notion of sex talk as uncomfortable or scandalous. Instead, their conversation is casual, confident and informative. Regarding her first time, Wilson recalls:

> It was pretty anti-climactic, literally and figuratively. We’d been dating for years and we were very safe. We knew we were both very ready and we were really in love and we really trusted each other and we were each other’s best friends. We were gonna use two forms of birth control every single time. It was also good because I felt like we could laugh about it if things weren’t going well or if things were uncomfortable, which as it turns out they kinda were. I could tell him like, “No don’t do that. Please do this, please don’t do this,” and it felt good. Like, I have no regrets about that.

Green points out four things for her viewers to take away from Wilson’s account as good advice: trust, communication, protection, and feeling ready. The video is upbeat but rarely humorous, and the occasional jokes made are unrelated to the potential awkwardness of sex talk.

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Wilson’s first comment on sexuality captures the overall message: “I think it’s important to accept sex as a part of life and as a healthy part of life, and as a positive part of life, and to be responsible about it.” Acceptance and positivity – not shame – should guide the way we discuss sex, and Wilson provides an example of what that looks like.

While celebrity guest confessions – especially from YouTube celebrities – are a repeat occurrence on Green’s channel, at other times a guest is preferred because Green feels they would be a more qualified and appropriate speaker. For instance, in “Sex with Disabilities,” Green invites her friend and student activist Olivia to discuss how muscular dystrophy has affected her love life. In this case, the use of personal revelation has less to do with dispelling embarrassment and more to do with asserting agency and voice within a marginalized group. Personal connection to the content is considered key to accuracy, as can be seen when Olivia declines to speak at length about intellectual disabilities, saying, “This topic is a little difficult for me to discuss because it’s not my experience.” The video includes, among other things, Olivia’s admission that she is currently sexually active with her boyfriend of three years and a demonstration of how her wheelchair can be manipulated to facilitate sex. Her overall message is, “Honestly, it’s not that different from dating someone who’s able-bodied.” While the video involves bringing private matters to public light, its message is not focused on the taboo of discussing sex with disabilities, but rather the ignorance of its existence. Still, the ease with which the two discuss Olivia’s sex life enforces the channel’s constant message that sex can and should be talked about. As Olivia says, “Communication starts from day one. You always have

11 Laci Green, “SEX WITH DISABILITIES?” YouTube video, 7:31, posted by lacigreen, February 27, 2014. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Pq4GS-QnCs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Pq4GS-QnCs)
to be having that conversation of what you’re comfortable with, what you’re not comfortable with and what you’re capable of doing.”

As the videos with Wilson and Olivia illustrate, Green’s approach to encouraging communication is typically to show how normal and easy it is to talk about sex. However, she does at times play with the taboo for the sake of entertainment. In “Juicy Secrets w/ Joey Graceffa!” Green and fellow YouTube celebrity Graceffa take turns picking sex and dating questions out of a hat. These include questions about their first kisses, ultimate turn ons, whether they “wait before getting sexual,” what their current partner is like, and more. As the title implies, the point of the video is the fun in disclosing private information, and giggles, gasps and exclamations abound throughout. Occasionally, Green does weave in general relationship information. When Graceffa says that open relationships never work out in the end, Green chimes in, “Fun fact: I do know some people who have had long-term open relationships. That’s their thing, and they’ve been doing it for like fifteen years, and that’s just their life.” On another question asking whether Graceffa has ever been in love, he says he isn’t sure what’s considered love, and Green provides some input: “People think of romantic love as this separate thing from the love you have for your parents or your siblings or something, but I’ve found that it’s actually very similar. Really, really fiercely caring about someone, and they’re so intertwined with your life they’re like your blood.” These answers are as close to education as Green gets in this video.

Although the overall point of Green’s channel is sexual health education, “juicy secrets” type videos help to provide some light-hearted variety to retain the interest of her subscribers and bring in new viewers through a celebrity. Graceffa currently has over 4,500,000 subscribers and joined Green in standard YouTube cross-collaboration fashion, posting an “Advice with Laci!”

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video to his own channel and directing viewers to check out her channel for the “juicy secrets” version. While the video is hyped as a revelation of secrets, and private sex and dating information is revealed, Green does not venture far into the sexual taboo. For example, when Graceffa draws a question on his first kiss, Green jokingly urges him to “describe it in graphic detail,” the joke being that a kiss is a relatively tame sexual act. When asked to describe her partner, Green only vaguely states that he is “a really awesome person,” and when asked about turn ons, they each give distinctly unprovocative answers: “an open mind” and “confidence.” Whenever a response garners raised eyebrows and gasps, it is a playfully exaggerated, teasing reaction. For instance, when Green draws the question on whether she has ever cheated or been cheated on, she begins with an abashed expression, saying, “Well…” Graceffa gasps and gives the camera a shocked, excited smile, before Green answers, “No, no, no, I really didn’t know that this person considered us in a relationship!” All of their questions and responses are similarly tame, posing little risk to their reputations.

By contrast, Essence’s video makes a point of asking relatively shocking questions, though with the same tone of laughter and fun. Charreah Jackson begins, “I gotta ask you, when was your last orgasm?” The first interviewee throws back her head in guffaws and calms herself enough to answer, “Yesterday,” before again breaking into giggles. “Hey now! That’s what I’m talking about,” cries Jackson, and she offers a high five. In another cut with a girl and her mother, the older woman comments, “This is gonna be embarrassing, watch,” and playfully feigns horror – followed by a smile – when her daughter asks, “With myself or…?” The daughter claims one week ago, while the mother claims one day, to which Penn gleefully responds, “Oh, good for you! You’re doing better than your daughter! I’m not mad at that.” The intimate questions continue, with responses ranging from shyly hesitant to deadpan to enthusiastic. One
middle aged woman calmly reveals, “My biggest fantasy is to be with four men.” Another gives a cautious smile before squeaking into the mike, “Handcuffs?” A more eager responder answers, “If I was in a park, something like the Malibu party where everybody at the party is on you. That kinda—I love that.” When asked whether they would have sex in a family member’s home while on vacation, some say absolutely not, while others laugh “Hell yeah!” or “Yeah, in the bathroom I would.”

In addition to being entertaining, these more intimate interrogations—and at times surprisingly candid confessions—display a greater commitment to the “no shame in sexuality” message than either Fletcher or Green’s videos. One can see what the same topic looks like in a more sober piece from Jackson in her article “Not Awkward: 5 tips for talking to anyone about sex and birth control,” which stresses the importance of talking to your friends, family, partner and doctor.\(^\text{14}\) Jackson interweaves examples of her own experience practicing what she preaches and how it has helped her, as when she was able to discuss IUDs with her mother who had used them before. However, there is a powerful difference between Jackson writing in an article on a birth control support network, “Now that I am in my late twenties, my mother and I have more woman-to-woman chats,” and watching Jackson interview a mother and daughter on the street about their sexual experiences, revealing before one another their latest orgasm, sexual fantasy, condom preference and more. The message of the video is that if this mother and daughter can tell each other their fantasies of public sex and sex on a swing, you can certainly talk to your mother (or sex partner, or gynecologist, or whomever) about birth control.

Another notable aspect of the *Essence* video is the variety of confessors. As Fletcher mentioned, it can help ease one’s sense of shame to remember that we are all in the same boat. Wilson approaches this same notion when she describes sex as “a part of life.” In her article, Jackson’s number two tip for talking about sex is “Remember, everyone else is sexual too”:

Finding out your grandma was called “buttered biscuit” may be a bit much to take in, but the truth is all of our grandmothers had sex! While embracing your own sexuality, remember that everyone else is sexual too. So if your aunt or older sister bring up getting it on or getting on birth control, take it as an opportunity to ask about their experiences. Or feel free to bring it up yourself—they probably have great insight to share.

The style of her *Essence* video—interviewing everyday women on the street—lends itself well to this concept. While Fletcher, Green and Green’s interviewees are all in their twenties (Wilson being the eldest at twenty-six), *Essence*’s interviewees show a bit more age diversity. The ten women featured do not state their ages, but appear to show a fairly even range from early twenties to late middle aged, comprising a variety of personal styles and body types. The fact that some interviewees are friends or family interviewed together also supports Jackson’s philosophy that sex is something you should feel free to talk about within your personal support network.

Of course, when it comes to race and gender *Essence* is uniform, since the magazine is aimed at African American women. But why is a women’s magazine taking up the issue of birth control in the first place? As all of the videos demonstrate, women’s voices predominate throughout sexual health advocacy. One reason sexual health bears a special significance to women in particular is that women’s bodies are the ones at risk of becoming pregnant; they are the ones who have to give birth, undergo an abortion, access daily birth control pills or emergency contraception and so on. Another aspect, and one especially relevant to confession, is
that women bear a greater risk of stigma than men when exercising and discussing their sexuality. Therefore, their confessions carry the added weight of rejecting traditional gendered restrictions on sexuality. Sexual health advocacy is thus closely tied to the feminist goal of women’s sexual liberation. In her “Not Awkward” article for Bedsider.org, Jackson references her birth control piece for *Essence* as follows:

I recently hit the streets of New York with a big sign that said “Let’s Talk About Sex.” As the granddaughter of a southern woman who avoided even saying the word—she would say ‘seg’ if she absolutely had to reference the act—I had come a long way in finding my sexual voice as I waved women over to be interviewed for a web series.

*Essence* and Bedsider are both women oriented, and Jackson makes a clear connection between femaleness and the struggle to find one’s “sexual voice.” Her first tip on her list for talking about birth control is, “Embrace your sexual self.” As she explains, this involves getting in touch with your sense of sexual pleasure:

Get comfortable embracing the fact you were born a sexual being—even if that means setting a monthly date on your Google calendar to explore your sensuality. The more you engage with your own sexual identity, the more empowered you’ll be to take charge in and outside the bedroom.

Jackson’s suggestion to accept one’s own sexuality echoes Mara Wilson’s emphasis on accepting sex as healthy and positive, and indeed feminism is an explicit component of Green’s interview with Wilson. Green questions how growing up in the public eye impacted Wilson’s sexual health in terms of her emotional and mental well-being. Wilson explains:

A lot of female child stars will think that to grow up is to be sexy… It did definitely affect the way that I grew up and the way that I viewed my body. This happens with a lot of young women who grow up in the public eye. They feel like their bodies are not their own. Any time I do any
kind of appearance, “She should do her hair differently. She should do this, she should do that,” you know, “She’s really ugly now, blah blah blah blah blah.” And I’m like guys, you know what? My appearance is not for you.

Wilson identifies herself as a feminist, saying that feminism is “about women being judged for what they do, they’re actions, things like that, rather than their genitals or their appearance or their identity, or something like that.” To this Green adds, “Yeah, being more than just a body that can deliver pleasure to other people.” The notion that a woman’s sexual health involves claiming her sexuality for herself—rather than seeing it as something that exists for and is controlled by others—is what makes *Essence*’s sexual questions not merely a marketing ploy or a rejection of awkwardness, but a healthy, feminist assertion of female sexual agency. As Jackson phrases it, her interviews were an example of women finding their “sexual voices” and embracing their “sexual selves” so that they may “take charge” of their sexual health. Their unapologetic talk of having orgasms, fantasies and sex is an affirmation that they are each a sexual being with their own pleasure to celebrate and attend to, rather than “a body that can deliver pleasure to other people.”

This effort to emphasize pleasure and female agency in sexual health education dates back to the 1960s, with the sexual revolution and the burgeoning second wave feminist movement. The invention of accessible, effective contraception greatly expedited the shift in sexual mores already underway in America, most notably destabilizing the necessity of marriage. At the time, federally funded sex education in public schools was limited to STI prevention and warnings against masturbation, prostitution, and premarital sex.\(^\text{15}\) In 1964, in order to provide education more suited to the times, Planned Parenthood’s medical director Mary Calderone

founded the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS), which continues to be a major resource in the development and implementation of comprehensive sex education programs today. As Calderone explained it, “We put sexuality into the field of health rather than the field of morals.” SIECUS employed an expanded notion of sexuality that applied to one’s life and personality rather than simply the sex act and offered sex education that emphasized sexual pleasure, openness, and individual choice over guilt and shame. The appropriateness of abstinence-only versus comprehensive sex education in public schools has been a major political debate ever since. In her twenty-year study of sex education debates, sociologist Kristin Luker explains that

Comprehensive programs teach that sex is normal, natural and healthy. Ideally, they provide social-emotional guidance to help students negotiate their feelings and needs within their personally developed value systems. By contrast, abstinence-only education teaches that sex outside of marriage will cause social, psychological and physical damage. These programs discuss alternative STI and pregnancy prevention methods only in terms of their failure rates. The government did not begin funding comprehensive sex education programs until 2010, and abstinence-only programs continue to receive federal support.

The lack of sufficient sex education in schools is one reason why sex educators have taken to the internet. In her discussion with Wilson, Green explains, “One of my big criticisms of the way that America does sex ed is that it’s very fear driven. It’s all about making you scared and terrified and not actually about giving you information.” Not only does Green consider the

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derogation of sexuality an ethical failure, but she is a firm believer the effectiveness of a positive, celebratory approach. She is not alone. Growing evidence suggests that safe sex education that places pleasure first—such as teaching techniques for more fulfilling sex or including images of desire—is more effective in promoting safe practices than fear-driven lessons on risk prevention, which frequently send the inadvertent message that safe sex and desirable sex are incompatible.  

Similarly, in her comparative study of Dutch and American families, sociologist Amy Schalet concludes that Dutch teens’ far lower rates of unplanned pregnancy and STIs relative to American teenagers are due to Dutch parents’ and Dutch sex education programs’ emphasis on openness, pleasure and autonomy.

Throughout her American interviews, Schalet found “the notion of teenage sexuality as an individual, overpowering force that is difficult for teenagers to control.” Both boys and girls in the US, she argues, see sex as a danger. American parents view it as their responsibility to protect their children from hormonal impulses until the children become autonomous adults who can regulate themselves. In the Netherlands, “Youth are expected to possess an internal barometer with which they can pace their sexual progression…and discern the point at which they are ready to move toward sexual intercourse.” Parents see it as their responsibility to “adjust themselves to their children’s pace of development…lest they lose touch with the reality of their children’s lives.” According to Schalet, the American belief that teenagers are incapable of managing the risks of sex becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The Dutch process of

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21 Ibid, Ch. 3.

22 Ibid, Conclusion.

23 Ibid, Ch. 2.
normalization allows for more open communication between teenagers and adults, opening the door for support and education that “gives teenagers opportunities to learn the interactional skills with which they can better recognize and articulate sexual wishes and boundaries, and negotiate contraception and condoms…without fear of causing disappointment or being shamed.”

Because even the most sexually liberal Americans tend to be less comfortable with their child’s sexuality than their Dutch counterparts and more anxious about the risks, American teenagers are much more likely than Dutch teens to have “ambivalent and negative feelings” about their early sexual experiences.

Schalet’s study demonstrates the sexually conservative culture that sex confessors are working to change. Even the relatively liberal comprehensive education supporters in the US (and in Fletcher’s case, England) would likely be uneasy with the degree of openness with which Dutch education programs discuss sexual intimacy in public schools. For instance, one Dutch textbook explains to students, “making love takes patience. Your whole body is full of places that want to be caressed, rubbed, licked, and bitten softly.” Such content would be downright scandalous in an American public school’s program. According to sociologist Janice Irvine, early sex educators of sixties and seventies stirred so much anxiety and hostility among US sexual conservatives that they frequently faced accusations of sexual perversion and child molestation. Still today, sexologists fighting to push the boundaries of sex talk in formal settings—both in sex research and sex education—struggle to be taken seriously or gain funding in the face of critics who deem their discussions immoral and inappropriate.

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24 Ibid, Conclusion.
25 Ibid, Ch. 1.
26 Ibid.
27 Irvine, Talk About Sex, 58-59.
While school boards must answer to concerned parents, online sex educators are able to independently take their messages directly to adolescents. The anti-shame, pro-normalization messages of sexual health confessors help provide viewers with the confidence and vocabulary they need to communicate their needs, wants and questions so that they may have safer, more fulfilling sex. Videos such as Jackson’s *Essence* piece in particular help to eroticize safe practices such as condom use by making it the concluding point to a video on fantasy and orgasm. In addition, research suggests that adolescents are more likely to share sexual messages with their peers through social media if the information is presented humorously. One study found that the main factors preventing adolescents from sharing sexual health information online was fear of bullying or gossip related to the stigma of sexual health concerns, especially in relation to STIs.\(^9\) The researchers found that comedic messages were a significant way to mitigate stigma and encourage the sharing of sexual health education media. In this way, the entertainment value of confessions—both through humor and celebrity draw—might be an effective vehicle for reaching youth.

Still, if pushing the boundaries on sex talk is to be encouraged, how do you know when it is too much? Bedsider addressed this concern in a post titled, “TMI: Can you really share too much?”\(^{30}\) In it, they acknowledge their constant push for readers to talk openly about sex, saying, “You know how much we appreciate honest conversations about sexual health and birth control. And we love talking intimately about life and relationships. We also love it when you’re chatty, effusive, candid, and loquacious.” Even so, they caution, not everyone in your life will be


comfortable with you talking about sex. Whether the topic is your birth control or your favorite sex positions, Bedsider encourages you to feel out your audience:

If a person is important to you and you respect their comfort level, we think it’s okay to watch what you say and try to make your point with some sensitivity. We don’t want you to shrink your voice or be someone you’re not. We just think there’s room to express your thoughts and experiences in different ways depending on your audience.

This particular piece of advice is oriented to in-person discussions, and would arguably give a free pass to online confession videos, considering that the audience is self-selected. Everyday Health, on the other hand, puts greater focus on the potential consequences for the sharer and the sharer’s partner, particularly in the digital age. Consulting the expertise of two (female) psychologists who specialize in marriage and sex therapy, respectively, Everyday Health’s Beth Orenstein tells us “The Dos and Don’ts of Talking about Your Sex Life.”

According to Orenstein, we should feel free to talk to our partners, sex therapist and—if we’ve gotten the okay from our partner first—our trusted friends. We should not be talking about our sex life with “the town gossip,” on a public online post, or even in a private online message if we have not yet met the recipient in person. In short, Orenstein’s experts believe that one’s personal sex information only belongs in a few, carefully chosen hands.

To be fair, when Orenstein says “sex talk,” she is primarily thinking in terms of sharing one’s “sex-capades.” It is unclear what Orenstein would have to say about one’s trip to the Dean Street Clinic or choice of birth control, or what precisely she believes to be the consequences of oversharing, other than the vague concern that you “open yourself up to all kinds of chatter” and risk having stories heard by “the wrong people.” The impact on one’s partner is a salient point.

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Perhaps Green was wise to limit her partner’s description to “a really awesome person.” Not all sexual health confessors take this precaution. One YouTuber, Sarah Rae Vargas, produces a series titled “Let’s Talk About Sex” in which she frequently references her sexual activities with her current and past boyfriends in the process of advising her viewers. Vargas describes herself as “a twenty-something mother of two toddlers” who runs a fashion and beauty blog in addition to her YouTube channel.32 Her “Let’s Talk About Sex” series is one of many on her channel, including a “Body Confidence” series, “How To’s,” “Product Reviews,” and casual day-in-the-life vlogs. Her channel has over 300,000 subscribers. Like Fletcher, Vargas is not a professional sexual health educator. As such, she relies solely on personal beliefs and experiences to advise her viewers, whom she describes as mostly “young.”33 Among her wide variety of sexual health videos, one can find: instruction on oral sex and sexting, a body positivity video titled “My Weird Vajayjay,” tips on feminine hygiene, how to respond to “prom night pressure,” and advice for women who are uncomfortable with their partners watching pornography.

Vargas is more explicit in her sexual confessions than the aforementioned confessors. For instance, in her video “A Little Rough,”34 she provides a show-and-tell of her various sex toys and personal tips that could be useful for a beginner to submission and dominance play, including her favorite handcuffs and whips. In encouraging her viewers to explore and figure out what works for them, she recounts, “I’ve had the experience of being choked and of being spanked so hard that his handprints were literally left on my ass in the form of bruising. I couldn’t walk straight. I’ve had some painful experiences and that is just not for me, not at all. I have discovered that. But it’s for some people, and that’s cool.” It is not uncommon for Vargas

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32 Sarah Rae Vargas, “Ravings by Rae,” http://ravingsbyrae.com/about/
33 Sarah Rae Vargas, “A Little Rough” YouTube video, 5:40, posted by Sarah Rae Vargas, October 5, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1muYzUDNg4M
34 Ibid.
to integrate brief mentions of boyfriend’s actions, likes and dislikes, as when she comments, “Some people don’t like incorporating things like this. Like, my guy, he wouldn’t be interested in getting whipped in the bedroom, but of course a hand can do just as well.” However, at other times her accounts of partners can be more revealing and critical. In her video “Losing My Virginity,” she recalls her experience with her high school boyfriend of three years. Vargas describes him as follows:

He was like really heavy, okay? I’m talking north of 400 pounds. He was a big dude and he was real’ short. It wasn’t like muscular, like he was a big dude. And his penis was not big at all. It had some girth, because of course it would have to have some, right? When your body’s that big your junk is bound to be a little thick. But it was really, really, really short, like maybe four inches hard. Like, it wouldn’t escape my palm if I had my hand wrapped around it. So it was pretty small, so it didn’t really hurt because he didn’t get very deep, and he never got deep in all the years that we dated because he couldn’t.

She goes on to describe in detail the positions they tried that night and emotional problems over the course of their relationship with lying and insecurity, including the fact that “he was a little insecure about his thang.” She mentions mistakes she made in her approach to their relationship and in terms of protection, telling her viewers what she would have done differently and responding to questions viewers sent her about losing their virginity.

Vargas’s approach does have some notable advantages. For one, as with several interviewees from the Essence piece, her willingness to delve into fairly graphic revelations demonstrates a significant commitment to shameless, open sex talk. Additionally, her highly detailed, contextualized accounts of personal exploits may make her advice more memorable and understandable than general maxims of the Mara Wilson variety. However, Vargas does not clarify whether she asks permission from her current boyfriend before posting information about
their sex life, and it is unlikely that the man she describes in “Losing My Virginity” would be pleased by the description. While Vargas does not reveal his name, it is not outside the realm of possibility that an old classmate or one of his family members might come across her videos and know whose intimate insecurities she’s revealing. In telling this story, Vargas risks violating her ex-boyfriend’s privacy.

It is important to consider whether the close line Vargas walks by divulging partner information is worth its potential benefits. Fletcher demonstrates that there are embarrassing humps to cross far removed from sex itself. Green shows that it is possible to pass on the wisdom of personal sex experience and even play up the entertainment value in the idea of the taboo without actually delving into graphic detail. From *Essence*, we can see that even when one wants to shock, it is possible to share purely individual information without risking the comfort of a partner. With such an array of sexual information categories and confessional styles available to the curious and voluntary online surfer, perhaps the only line to draw for sexual health advocate confessors is their own comfort levels and that of their partners. Although these public confessors are addressing certain topics specifically because many consider them too personal to comfortably share with even their most intimate circle, the confessors maintain a level of acceptability by using a platform and context wherein the viewer was likely searching for that information and stands to gain from its being shared. In the end, the demonstration of female sexual agency as well as the educational value, authenticity, entertainment and—perhaps most importantly—normalization of sex talk that comes from individuals publicly discussing their sexuality appear to make confession a fruitful method of sexual health advocacy.
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