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anne brown
akbh66@umsystem.edu

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Bridging the Gap: Informal Sex Education on TikTok

Anne Brown

Department of Sociology, University of Missouri-St. Louis

INTRODUCTION

Schools in the United States are not required to provide sex education to students, leaving school districts to decide what type of sex education, if any, they provide (SIECUS, 2019). If sex education is offered, the curriculum must present abstinence as the preferred choice of practice (SIECUS, 2019).

SEX EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

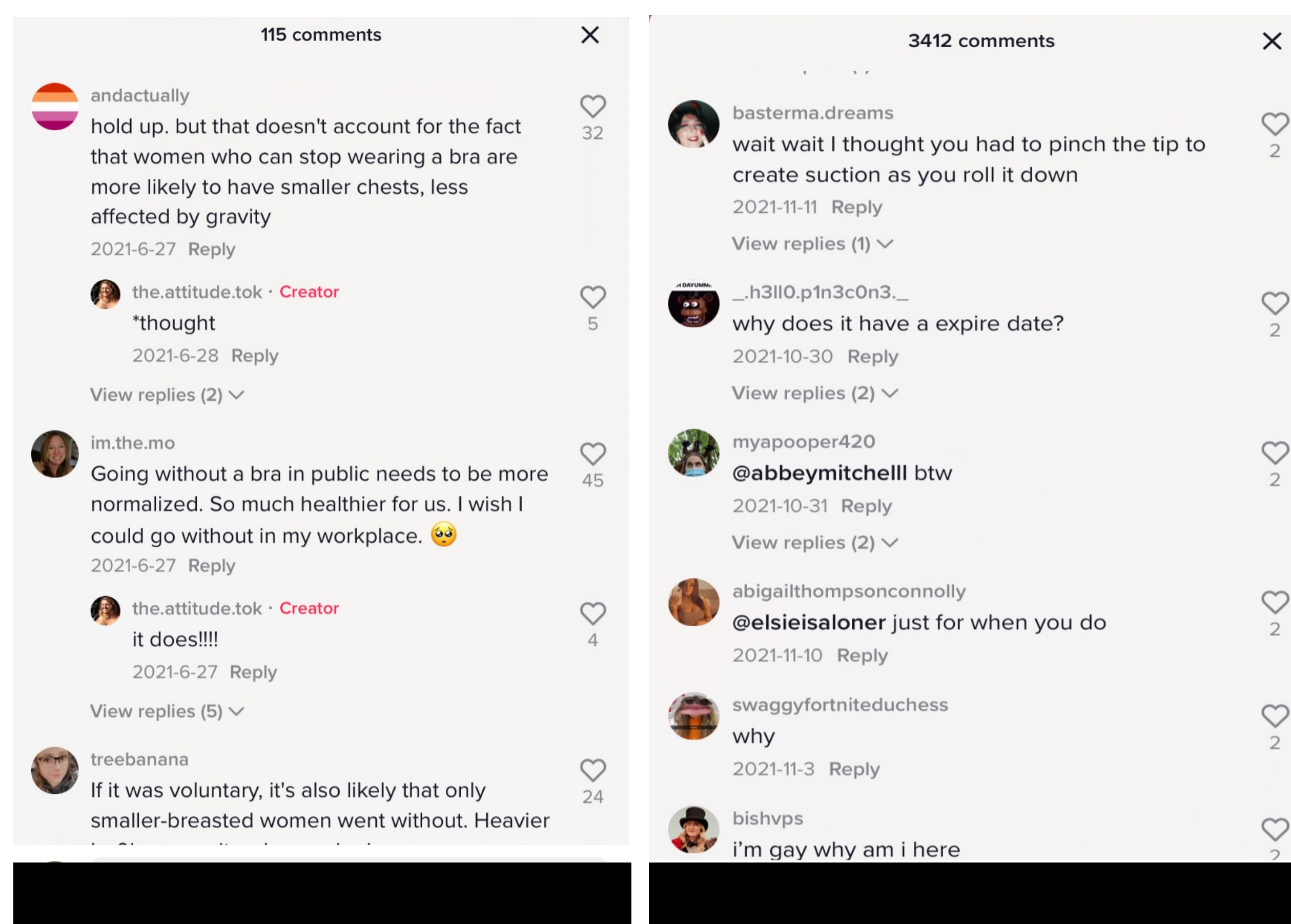
- United States government has promoted and invested more than **2.1 billion dollars** in Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage (AOUM) education for decades (SIECUS, 2019).
- Studies have found that AOUM has little effect on the sexual behavior of adolescents (Mathematica Policy Research, 2007).
- Yet, the leading model for sex education world-wide is the Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) framework.
- Only **thirteen** states mandate sexual education instruction be medically accurate,
- **Eight** require curriculum not to include racial/ethnic or gender bias,
- **Eight** require that it be inclusive of sexual orientation, and
- **Two** require that it does not promote religion (Guttmacher Institute, 2016).
- Adolescents and young adults seek information from different avenues.
- Online platforms offer a wide range of innovative ways for young people to acquire information on sexual education and identity (Simon and Daneback, 2013).

SEX EDUCATION ONLINE

- Smartphone usage increased by 64% since 2011.
- Additionally, 49% of adolescents used technology to discuss sexual health topics with their partner, these adolescents were found to be 3 times higher to use condoms, versus those who did not.
- There is a growing body of evidence that show digital spaces have been positively linked with social support, self-esteem, and reduced loneliness (Shaw & Gant, 2002) by improving knowledge, express emotions, and develop interpersonal relationships (Barak, Boniel-Nissim, & Suler, 2008).

PURPOSE

I explore the United States' lack of adequate and explicit sex education policy, and how adolescent and young adults' use social media to bridge their knowledge gap. Specifically, I examine how users seek and receive sex education through informal means, such as TikTok.



Examples

METHODS

- I perform a content analysis of TikTok videos (i.e., video's topic, and its number of likes, shares, and comments) and a discourse analysis of users' comments on the videos to understand how they engage with the material
- 52 videos were collected on three randomly-selected days throughout the month of March 2022: March 12th, March 16th, and March 17th

RESULTS

- Common video topics included things such as reproductive anatomy, vaginal health, safe and consensual sexual behaviors, fundamental purpose of sex for humans, sex with physical and intellectual disabilities, pleasure, sex vs. gender, and comprehensive sex education.
- In the discourse analysis (i.e. comment section on TikTok) phrases such as:
 - “I wish this was taught in my sex ed.”
 - “thanks for using inclusive language.”
 - “if you haven't already can you make a video on dryness.”
 - “I love your content. Too many previous generations don't talk about it...then how we gonna learn. Thank you for letting me learn about ME.”
 - “This taught me more than my health class. Want to know what my class said? Abstinence is the best way and that's all.”
- Contributors to the comment section express gratitude to the content creator and suggest that TikTok is an important source of information not taught elsewhere (e.g., *in* schools or through informal interpersonal conversations).

DISCUSSION

- My preliminary findings suggest that TikTok users find sex education videos to be an important source of information for medically-accurate, pleasure-centric, and empowering sex education that lacked in other spheres.
- Further research should explore how to break down “formal” and “informal” teaching methods to bridge the gap between consumer (youth) and teacher.
- These are preliminary findings. Analysis will continue through the rest of Spring 2022 and will be presented at the American Sociological Association's annual conference in August 2022.

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University of Missouri-St. Louis
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