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## **Sexual Scripts and Sex Tips: Construction of the Spiciest Subject Through Sex Educational Content on TikTok**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis investigates the changing shape of sex education online, particularly sex education that is pointed toward young audiences in algorithmically-constrained communities on TikTok. Drawing from rhetorical theory, critical sexuality studies, and critical algorithm studies, I situate sex education on TikTok within a broader paradigm of sexual scripting and sexual subjectification processes that participate in the cultural neoliberal sphere. I explore how sex educational TikToks rhetorically construct technosexual agents through digital pedagogies while navigating complex algorithmic constraints—and to do so, I analyze two emergent sexual scripts in these videos: that of orgasm and aftercare. While orgasm discourses fold neatly into previous scholarship on neoliberal self-optimization and disciplinary devices, aftercare's roots in BDSM communities construct sexual subjects along a different vector, where rhetorical agency and power-conscious dialectics resist traditional sex education's re/productive goals. Ultimately, I introduce a framework to begin conceptualizing the rhetorical construction of sexual subjects under a neoliberal cultural paradigm complicated by TikTok's algorithmic constraints, without losing sight of the restorative potential that emerges from the collision of disperse sexual epistemes.

**Keywords:** sex education, sexual scripts, rhetorical agency, technosexuality, TikTok

Sexual Scripts and Sex Tips: Construction of the Spiciest Subject Through Sex Educational  
Content on TikTok

by  
Ashley G. Hay  
B.S., Oregon State University, 2020

Thesis  
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Communication and Rhetorical Studies

Syracuse University  
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## Chapter One: Introduction

Upon my earliest conceptualization of this thesis, in May of 2022, I had begun to piece together the fragments of a project that would consider the changing role of influencers in the broader sex education landscape, particularly on algorithmically-driven platforms with young audiences like TikTok. I was seeing women—and some men—gain millions of followers from delivering bite-sized subversive history lessons, reproductive care tips, how-to guides for conversations about intimacy, empowerment manifestations, and euphemistic sexual demonstrations to their younger audiences. Australian PhD student, author, and influencer Esme Louise James, for example, created “Kinky History,” which is an online lecture series via TikTok with 2.2 million followers. Dr. Jennifer Lincoln, an OBGYN and health influencer, runs “the health class you wish you had in high school” on TikTok for 2.8 million viewers. And beyond these sizable influencers, I saw a litany of smaller creators who deliver niche content to fluid audiences. Lesbian educators, gynecologists, intimacy directors, dominatrices, erotic coaches, marriage therapists, and sexologists all carve space on this platform to share their iteration of sex education. Thus, there are many subcultural perspectives on sex. Each invoke different identities, goals, and values—it is a nuanced, fragmented pedagogical landscape.

But to be clear, this is not a new genre of content—*Cosmopolitan* magazine, and other women’s magazines of the early twenty-first century, have been at the forefront of both reproductive health information and long-critiqued sex advice for decades (Frischherz, 2018a). Film and television likewise radically reshaped—and is still reshaping—the current landscape of sex education, most apparent with the ongoing, popular Netflix series *Sex Education* (Mayer, 2020). And of course, even prior to Cosmo, the print revolution fundamentally changed how

sexual knowledge was distributed, parsed, and accessed. In other words, there is a long tradition of sexual knowledge changing shape through mediated channels (Gowing, 2016).

Even outside of mediated channels, formal sex education is not a pedagogically stagnant episteme. Jensen's (2010) book *Dirty Words: The Rhetoric of Public Sex Education, 1870-1924* tracks the origins and uptake of American public sex education, originally framed discursively through "social purity," and later transformed into contemporary "abstinence only" discourses. Jensen (2010) argues, however, that sex educators have long found ways to discuss sex through "strategic ambiguity" (p. 154), allowing them to address taboo subjects before public audiences—a strategy that persists today. While there are, perhaps, more stable, conservative throughlines in formal sex education (Jensen, 2010; Kelly, 2016; Weingarten, 2013), pedagogical approaches to sex education remain deeply entwined with mediated sexual cultures insofar as subjects uptake, resist, and negotiate these fluid epistemological environments.

Thus, what interests me and, by extension, guides this thesis, is threefold: first, the negotiated locale of sex education, where the traditional classroom becomes secondary to public knowledge online (Johnston, 2017). Second, the channels that audiences themselves find, pick through, shape, and create to access knowledge that still, to many, feels suppressed or subversive, given formal and platformed constraints upon sex education. And third, more specific to this project, is the construction of an episteme in an algorithmically-driven environment that moves the locus of agency toward the sexual subject and away from sexual society, participating in—though not necessarily blindly upholding—a broader trend of neoliberal sex education and sexual scripting.

I write this with an acute sense of my own stake in this project. By the time I had reached my early twenties, I had experienced sex education, in the broadest and most creative sense, in



several contexts, including via: Brigham Young University's (BYU) online sex ed curriculum for high school; Tumblr and assorted other social platforms; individual sexual partners; various gynecologists; erotic literature; sex therapy; pelvic floor physical therapy; and scholarly research. This list is approximately chronological but also necessarily conflated—sexual knowledge, in my experience, has predominantly occurred in overlapping, catalyzed moments that often followed crises of sexuality, sexual experience, reproductive health, or all three. This is not a unique experience, especially for those whose sexual experience do not follow linear, normative tracks as prescribed by traditional curricula. Thus, I am invested in the various avenues that sex education follows, particularly for young women, following much personal experience with the risks and opportunities embedded in each epistemological method. My interest in the confluence of material constraints, digital knowledges, and broader online structures are all driven by the shards of my own experience navigating these murky epistemes from the time I was about fifteen years old.

And my own stake—and others'—is still rising. While this project began to take shape in May of 2022, by June, when *Roe v. Wade* was overturned, this area of study began to feel more urgent. The Supreme Court decision *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* significantly altered the digital landscape of women's reproductive health conversations. While prior to the decision, my early sense was that of broad groupings of creators sticking to niche educational topics—such as pelvic health, sensuality training, sexual advocacy, queer relationships, or reproductive education—after the decision, it seemed that every influencer I encountered had something to say about sexual or reproductive health in a “post-Roe world.” These were not conversations confined to the biopolitical sphere, either—online discourse centered partners who were now asked to receive vasectomies; difficult conversations with

coworkers or family; digital surveillance and legal rights; and even what “sex” itself meant in the context of specific sex acts made riskier.

Thus, there is much work to do in the context of sex education and sexual knowledge. This is work that builds upon a rich body of scholarship that already exists—scholarship that is multidisciplinary, multimodal, and, in the best of cases, intersectional and grounded in specific communities, knowledges, and histories. This is also work that is rhetorical—as Alexander and Rhodes (2015) succinctly argue, “sexuality [is] robustly rhetorical” (p. 1)—and Branstetter’s (2015) addendum expresses that “rhetoric is also robustly promiscuous” (p. 18). This imaginative and dynamic interplay represents the rich potential for rhetoric’s intervention in studies of sexuality and sexual knowledge, particularly when we acknowledge the historical, interdisciplinary, and uniquely situated configurations of sex scholarship. Rhetoricians have turned their gazes toward sex, sexuality, and sexual epistemes from several ideological standpoints, many whom ultimately seek to interrogate the normalizing effects of power (Alexander & Rhodes, 2015).

In this thesis, I investigate the changing shape of sex education online, particularly sex education that is pointed toward young audiences in this fraught sexual and reproductive landscape. I respond to Fahs and McClelland’s (2016) call for a Critical Sexuality Studies that specifically centers conceptual analysis, attention to abject bodies, and critical assessment of heterosexual privilege. I also respond to calls for critical inquiry of sex education and sexuality to move beyond a reductive notion of reproductive health that is conflated with the health or wellness of the whole woman (Fahs & McClelland, 2016; Friz, 2020). Finally, I hope to participate in the tradition of scholars who take critical approaches to new media technologies,

which are embedded in complex cultural, sociohistorical, and political matrices (Durham, 2016; Warnick & Heineman, 2012).

This thesis draws from rhetorical theory, critical sexuality studies, and critical algorithm studies to situate sex education on TikTok within a broader paradigm of sexual scripting and sexual subjectification processes. I am interested in the tension between the pedagogical constraints of TikTok and neoliberal narratives of optimization, individual pleasure, and liberation—and additionally the tension between sexual agency and the sexual scripts that educators specifically promote. I ask (and answer): How are sex educational TikToks rhetorically constructing technosexual agents through digital pedagogies while navigating complex algorithmic constraints?

In Chapter Two, I introduce my literature review with a few core concepts relevant to this project. By drawing upon literature attending to rhetorical agency, technosexuality, and neoliberalism, I put into conversation various posthumanist and rhetorical perspectives, which help me theorize the role of the subject on social media platforms. Each part of the literature review builds upon the previous, culminating in an overview of neoliberalism, which begins to construct a cohesive approach to the changing rhetorics of sexuality occurring on algorithmically driven platforms like TikTok.

In Chapter Three, I discuss my methodology, which describes my approach to rhetorical criticism in digital contexts and explains the algorithmic platform governance shaping this project by invoking conversations occurring in critical algorithm studies and discussing constraints around my artifact collection. I also explain how I locate TikTok videos for this project and my broader categorization schema, where my case studies attend to two distinct elements of the sexual script—orgasm and aftercare.

In Chapter Four, I introduce my first case study, on TikTok creators' rhetorics of orgasm, and rhetorically analyze videos that establish sexual subjects from a stance of predated failure and never-ending self-discipline to achieve sexual success. Here, I ask: how do specific strategies of success, in response to predated orgasmic failure, rhetorically construct a sexual subject alongside platform-specific and educator-specific constraints? In Chapter Five, which introduces my second case study, I analyze aftercare discourses emerging from two different communities—that of traditional sex educators, and that of kinky sex educators with BDSM roots. In this case study, I examine videos that demonstrate alternative, resistive, or transgressive sex educational material, where sexual subjects are not universalized or optimized but rather, somehow, different.

Finally, in Chapter Six, I conclude this thesis, asserting my intervention, some implications from this project, and a cohesive accounting of the sexual subjectivities that arose through my analysis. I also include a self-reflexive note to account for my multiple roles while writing this thesis.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

There is much overlap between conversations on rhetorical agency, (techno)sexuality, and neoliberalism, and there is a substantial body of scholars whose work blurs these lines, such as the work of Rosalind Gill, Sarah Banet-Weiser, and Catherine Rottenberg, and work from theoretical scholars such as Michel Foucault and Judith Butler. This will become most apparent in the final part of this literature review, “Neoliberalism,” which I use to begin weaving together a coherent approach to this project with threads in each of the prior bodies of literature.

### **Rhetorical Agency**

Central to this project is the concept of rhetorical agency, which is relevant in two interconnected ways: the rhetorical agency that is practiced by creators on digital platforms, and the rhetorical agency of their audience. Ultimately, rhetorical agency speaks to the complex interplay of forces existing between rhetors and audiences. This interplay is especially important for my project, which focuses on technology that shapes, and is shaped by, users.

Campbell (2005) provides an early account of rhetorical agency with five propositions, and ultimately defines it as “the capacity to act,” (p. 3) located in texts and manifested in individual practices. Agency, Campbell (2005) writes, is not merely about an individual act, but also relies on uptake and recognition by others. Critically, Campbell (2005) attends to the communal and participatory nature of agency, where it is entwined with subjectivity to the extent that individuals have access to “culturally available subject-positions” (p. 4) that demand negotiation within institutional contexts. In short: rhetorical agency is not an isolated facet of the individual, but rather occurs collaboratively in a collective.

Miller (2007) extends this argument further, where agency is “the *kinetic energy* of rhetorical performance... a property of the rhetorical event or performance itself” (emphasis in original, p. 147). Like Campbell (2005), Miller (2007) writes that it is the capacity of both the rhetoric and audience, locating agency in the way it is attributed *to* audiences. In her thought experiment, AutoSpeech-Easy™—a fictional automated speech assessment system, modeled after similar writing assessment systems already in place—created a system in which a mechanized audience replaced the human audience within the rhetorical situation. Instructors of composition and public speaking were surveyed for their intuitive response to it, and their uneasy skepticism toward the fictional system helped Miller map out the boundaries of agency. Specifically, the removal of interactivity in this thought experiment demonstrated, to Miller and her respondents, that interaction is necessary for agency because “it is what creates the kinetic energy of performance and puts it to rhetorical use” (p. 150). Agency is therefore both the property of the event and of the rhetor-audience relationship. So there is no agency, Miller (2007) writes, prior to the act or performance of the rhetor, because interaction, audience, and performance all necessarily generate the energy of agency.

These definitions allude to other potential language for agency, such as Butler’s (2016) “performative agency,” which notes that “we are embodied creatures who are to some extent exposed to what we are called and dependent on the structures that let us live... [performative agency] cannot overcome these prior and constituting dimensions of social normativity” (p. 19). In this context, performativity involves two simultaneous processes: one, of being acted upon, by gender norms, for example, and two, “the conditions and possibilities for acting” (p. 16). That is, agency is inextricable from that which confines the subject’s possibilities for acting, but neither is necessarily always at odds with each other.

In locating rhetorical agency specifically between texts, contexts, rhetors, and audiences, there is much debate. Gunn and Cloud (2010) take a posthumanist approach which “[reverses the] locus of agency from the individual to the exterior” (p. 54), explicitly challenging humanist arguments that suggest rhetors can control or create phenomena through their rhetoric. Without favoring an overly deterministic approach, they define agency “as an open question” (p. 51) that sees individuals in contexts of situational specificity (p. 72). Agency, here, is still located with rhetors, but as a dialectical position that accounts for the entire rhetorical situation. To understand agency, scholars must examine the entire context, as well as the movement of forces back and forth, to understand subjects who have multiple complex positionings. Subjects are constrained by external forces but also negotiate with them—and they are not isolated, but rather embedded in social histories, communities, and ideologies.

There is much debate beyond the scope of humanist-posthumanist agency, as well, even as notions of agency are frequently driven by these broader philosophical underpinnings. Rand (2008) suggests that “the formal features of texts enable agency” (p. 299), an argument that emphasizes the attributes of texts that uphold or resist conventions—another exterior approach to agency. Just and Christiansen (2012) locate agency in text-audience relations, focusing their critical attention to the effects of texts upon audiences by using Judith Butler’s performativity. Rhetorical agency, they write, might best be likened to “the text’s offer of a subject position” (Just & Christiansen, 2012, p. 322), where rhetorical scholars can attend to the agential potential texts offer audiences, rather than whether, how, and when that offer is taken up. Just and Christiansen (2012), for example, use this framework of agency to study Danish diversity management rhetoric, where texts that describe an organization’s diversity practices construct some employees as “subjects of diversity” (p. 323) who occupy a strained social category both

normalized by, and restricted within, the organization. However, the role of the critic is not necessarily to map a path away from the construction of these strained subject positions—rather, it is to engage with Butler’s “constant critique of normalization” (p. 328) to “suggest alternatives, not as ways of ‘fixing’ discourses once and for all, but as a means of keeping them open to rhetorical possibilities for change” (p. 329). By framing agency as an offer, critics can imagine and explore rhetorical alternatives to the subject positions embedded in text-audience relations.

Digital contexts further complicate scholarly applications of rhetorical agency. While Miller (2007) treats technology as a “thought experiment” (p. 140) to understand human agency, others critically interrogate agency in and of technologies themselves. Brock and Shepherd (2017) call algorithms “complex and active rhetorical agents who make arguments to and through us via the activities they assist us with, and hinder us from, completing” (p. 26). The internet is undergirded by networks of agents, both visible and invisible, who shape everything from Google results in search engines to Match.com’s procedural systems. In short: Brock and Shepherd’s (2017) approach to algorithms as nonhuman rhetorical agents locates rhetorical agency in the collaborative interaction of algorithmic logics with human users.

Others have applied agency in different digital contexts. Adams, Applegarth, and Simpson (2020) argue that the role of algorithms in networked technology challenges theorized rhetorical agency, particularly in feminist contexts. For example, users’ choices to opt out of digital spaces, or opt into some networks but not others, are acts of agency that may appear as absence or silence without careful attention. Grabill and Pigg (2012) understand identity and agency to be produced through interaction that creates a “performance,” where identity performances can be catalysts for conversation in addition to acts of ethos. Broader analyses of algorithmic governance have pointed to rhetoric that blends machine and human agency, where



conceptualizations of so-called “algorithmic agency” inevitably overlap with human action (Zook & Blankenship, 2018). Demo (2017), for example, uses a symmetrical approach to user-app interactions that consider apps not as artifacts *upon which* rhetorical agency is enacted, but rather as active participants with agency themselves. This body of scholarship largely locates agency as somewhere between human acts and technological creations; thus, from a rhetorical perspective, attention must be paid to both the technology itself *and* its uptake by human agents.

In the context of this project, in line with much of the preceding scholarship, I adopt a posthumanist stance on rhetorical agency where the locus of agency is on the exterior, rather than interior, of the subject. That is, I can only understand agency through the dialectical possibilities and social histories which contribute to our rhetorical understanding of a subject—examining the “open question” (p. 73) emerging in artifacts, to borrow again from Gunn and Cloud (2010). I am invested in the ways algorithms—particularly black box, or learning, algorithms—complicate both the rhetorics that emerge online and how rhetorical scholars conceptualize their location in this nebulous field. Methodologically, these are themes that will surface again. But conceptually, in terms of the agency that I seek to locate in my artifacts, I find an agency that frames rhetoric as an offering—that is, paying attention to the rhetorical offer of a subject position (Just & Christiansen, 2012) rather than its subsequent uptake—will be generative toward understanding the technosexualities emerging online, such as on social media platforms like TikTok. Here, I attend to how texts offer—instruct, interpellate, constrain, suggest—to their subjects ideal forms of sexualities via sex educational content.

### **Technosexuality**

In conversation with rhetorical agency, technosexuality grapples with technology, agency, and human actors, as well. To introduce technosexuality, I will first briefly describe the

multidisciplinary groundwork behind sexuality studies, introduce rhetorical sexuality, and finally bridge these critical frameworks over to technosexuality on social media platforms.

Notably, studies of sex and sexuality are too broad and too multidisciplinary to effectively survey in a partial section of this literature review, so instead I'll focus on two key terms emerging from contemporary research: sexual subjectivity and sexual scripts, both of which are rooted in traditions outside of rhetoric, even if rhetoric can provide much to our understanding of these phenomena.

Sexual subjectivity is located in a rich body of research which is fundamentally concerned with how people understand their own sexual lives. Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* and Judith Butler's theory of performativity are both influential to this scholarly conversation, as Foucault and Butler both theorize a self which explains how individuals draw upon "discourses" (Foucault, 1988, p. 18) or "tools" (Butler, 1990, p. 145) to self-reflexively construct themselves. In the language of agency, this might be framed as the self's subjectivation process through Just and Christiansen's (2012) "offering," where the subject is acted upon by societal constraints but does not necessarily blindly uphold them. In this paradigm, scholars attending to technosexuality with a Foucauldian or Butlerian lens might engage in ongoing critique of the shape of normalized sexuality—the ways in which it is constructed, deployed, resisted, and embodied. For example, Harvey and Gill (2011) draw from Foucauldian technologies of the self to explore the construction of a new "sexual entrepreneur" who, beyond practicing a requisite sexual skillset, also manages her own self which is alluring, confident, and empowered. The postfeminist sexual entrepreneur is interpellated through discourses that construct sex as work—but, to be clear, Harvey and Gill (2011) do not argue that those who take

up this subject position lack creativity or even that discipline and agency are antithetical within scholarly work.

More tangibly, Fahs and McClelland (2016), in their call for a new Critical Sexuality Studies, define *sexual* subjectivity specifically as “how people narrate and make meaning around their own subjective experiences of sexuality” (p. 398). Sexual subjectivity is particularly generative for scholars when engaged with conversations of sexual scripts, emerging largely from psychology research. Sexual scripts were initially introduced by Simon and Gagnon (1969, 1986) to argue that sexual behavior is a social process rather than a biological imperative; as such, individuals’ sexual scripts are culturally and interpersonally rooted. Research on heterosexual scripts typically delineates between gender roles, where men's and women's desires, physicality, orgasm, and agency are considered fundamentally different because of the way they are socially influenced (Sakaluk, Todd, Milhausen, & Lachowsky, 2014). Sex researchers have found an approximate heteronormative script for sexual behavior among most men and women which privileges heterosexual encounters and male climax called the *traditional sexual script* (Dotson-Blake, Knox, & Zusman, 2012). Sex is conceived of as a linear process, penetrative intercourse is the apex of what constitutes sex, and all other non-coital behaviors are considered foreplay (Dotson-Blake et al., 2012). We see this script play out in romance novels, pornography, television, and new media (Dotson-Blake et al., 2012; Gamble, 2019; Markle, 2008; Ménard & Cabrera, 2011). For some, sexual encounters are only defined as such if they culminate in penetrative intercourse and male orgasm, which is a distressingly reductive and phallogentric definition of sex (Olivia-Lozano et al., 2022). Sexual scripts are relevant to this project insofar as they represent a heuristic to conceptualize sex educational content on TikTok—particularly content that is not biomedical or reproductive in nature, but rather more

vaguely intended to “improve” one’s sex life, because frequently sexual scripts provide a rough guideline for doing just this.

Sexual scripts and sexual subjectivity can both be approached through a rhetorical lens, as some rhetorical scholars are already doing. Alexander and Rhodes (2015) argue that sexuality is fundamentally rhetorical—it is a “set of textual, audiovisual, affective, and embodied tools through which bodies and psyches are shaped and cast in particular identity formations and through which such bodies and psyches might potentially be recast and reformed” (p. 1). Through this lens, scholars attend to the ways in which “normal” becomes re/configured under existing power structures—and subsequent attempts to disrupt discursive constructions of sex and sexuality. In a Foucauldian sense, rhetorical scholars of sex and sexuality are deeply attuned to power, and within that contextual scope, attentive to “the persuasive forces of bodies, intimacies, affects, erotics, and various partnerings” (p. 1). Identifying rhetorical sexuality is not a straightforward task. It requires attention to theory and methodology in contexts of the digital public sphere. It also benefits from interdisciplinary research.

Just as sexuality is a complex field with widely varied definitions and delineations, so too is technosexuality. Alexander and Rhodes (201) note the potential diversification of rhetorical practices of sexuality online, necessitating new configurations of publics, sex, and sexuality. The role that media environments play in facilitating sexual subjectivity centrally informs this thesis. Durham’s (2016) book *Technosex* argues in favor of epistemic reorientation from scholars—that is, the necessity of new approaches that grapple with new media as an apparatus of transformation for material bodies. Scholarship today typically locates sex beyond corporeality, where the body is a “cultural text... a malleable phenomenon” (Durham, 2016, p. 61). In a Foucauldian tradition, bodies are not simply biological agents upon which the self is implanted—

they are complex discursive constructions mediated by space, signs, myths, cultures, and environments. As such, Durham (2016) argues, “if we are to talk about sex, we must talk about signs, technologies, imaginations, and coprorealities... the interplay of elements that constitute this thing we call sex” (p. 74). Media is one essential feature that is currently contributing to sex and sexuality. For example, the proliferation of pornographic websites on the internet—estimated to be about 2.5 million sites—represents a “megacosm of desires” (p. 76), which contribute to the imagined sexualities of millions of people. We might also consider the proliferation of plastic surgery, softcore pornography, fertility drugs, or televised lingerie modeling—all examples of mediated, and ever-changing, sexuality.

Durham uses the term “sexscape” to describe the configuration of technologies, capital, medias, and identities that represent a “scape,” drawn from Appadurai’s (1996) original “scapes,” which produces a sexuality located in an acculturated body. While sex might be a catalytic agent in digital sexual phenomena, technologies manipulate sex, desire, and sexual practices—so much so that sexual subjectivities can no longer be divorced from the mediated sexscape. Durham’s (2016) work points out that scripts are frequently shaped in media contexts that are so embedded and ubiquitous that we are almost blind to the manipulation of the category of sex.

This is all to say that at this stage of technological involvement in our lives, sex and technology cannot be conceptualized as distinct from bodies. The epistemology of sex—how we know about it, where that knowledge comes from, how that knowledge circulates and becomes reinscribed in our (sex) lives—is inevitably mediated by technology, directly or indirectly. And just as technologies themselves, and thus the sexscape, are marked by transformation, so too is sexual subjectivity—in sum, Durham (2016) concludes, because of technology’s ever-changing

presence, “there can be no stable sexual subject of technosex” (p. 92). Contemporary scholars of sexuality, in Durham’s (2016) view, often understand sexuality in stagnant, linear, or finite terms—largely grounded in the psychosexual work of Freud, Piaget, Erikson, or others. In actuality, the transformation of technologies and sexual subjects together occurs in the context of globalization, corporate market demands, mainstream pornography and eroticism, celebrity performances, and a litany of other social, cultural, and economic changes—thus, the notion of a stable sexual subject is not realistic or productive in this current paradigm.

For example, Waskul’s (2015) account of “techno-sexuality” notes the “seething technologically mediated erotic ether” (p. 3), which underlies contemporary sexual awakenings and desires. Waskul’s work largely focuses on technology that mediates relationships, and treats techno-sexualities as an institution which young people largely treat pragmatically, as opposed to idealistically. Technology, in Waskul’s account, facilitates anticipatory sexual socialization as well as existing romantic relationships—in short, young people negotiate their reservations about digital mediums with the convenience of technology’s normative, everyday use. Waskul’s work adds nuance to Durham’s (2016) more abstract conversations about technology and sexuality, drawing from offline, lived accounts of young people to understand how they see technology playing a role in their sexual lives.

Ultimately, I hope to highlight both the theoretical groundwork and contemporary uptake of various iterations of technosexuality in scholarly conversation. While some ground technosexuality in embodied practice (Adams-Santos, 2020; Waskul, 2015), others offer theoretical accounts of subjectification processes that can alternatively promise sexual liberation or reify existing hegemonies (Durham, 2016). Guided by Alexander and Rhodes’ (2015) foundational claim that “sexuality works rhetorically” (p. 9), I am interested in rhetoric that

produces a sexual subject who exists within—perhaps, though, alternatively resisting and upholding—different heterosexual sexual scripts. As Durham (2016) claims, it is easy for scholars to forget “the significance of sex as a catalytic agent” (p. 81) in processes of (sexual) identity and ideologies, and this project specifically turns its gaze to sex educational discourses grounded in sex itself, understood through the frame of sexual scripts and platform constraints which are now co-constituted by sex.

### **Neoliberalism**

Threaded through these bodies of literature on rhetorical agency and technosexuality is a neoliberal acknowledgement of broader political, economic, and cultural trends that also shape the artifacts I analyze in this thesis. Neoliberal approaches to technology, agency, and sexuality are relevant to this project insofar as neoliberal ideologies shape much of the context surrounding the discourses I intend to analyze.

Neoliberalism is a term driven by much theory and relatively little continuity—broad and overarching, various scholars recommend that neoliberalism should be applied to local contexts rather than coherent global trends (Gershon, 2011). However, at its core, neoliberal perspectives are driven by amoral, if liberatory, rhetorics which emphasize personal empowerment and choice over collective good or regulation (Weiss, Jung, & Sharp-Hoskins, 2021). Dardot and Laval (2013) posit that neoliberal rationality is fundamentally governance through liberty, which requires “liberty as a condition of possibility” (p. 5), however opaque that liberty may be. This is to say that the notion of liberty, particularly as a “possibility,” opens doors to theoretical imaginings of where and how neoliberal logics locate agency—who can achieve liberty?

In the context of agency, neoliberal theorists have much to say. Neoliberalism locates *human* agency as central to its concept of liberation. Gershon (2011) argues, from an

anthropological perspective, that an important shift from liberal to neoliberal ideologies is that of the “vision of people owning themselves as though they were property to a... vision of people owning themselves as though they were a business” (p. 539). This turns the subject into a constellation of traits and assets, which must be developed, invested in, and optimized. Extended, when market rationality begins to play a role in self-concept in even non-public spheres, self-optimization can become a logic all on its own, where the self is expected to remain in a constant state of upward growth and personal improvement (Righti, 2018). For women in private spheres, this can be an especially insidious logic when applied to labor that neoliberal ideologies typically cannot account for, like as reproduction, emotional labor, and care work (Banet-Weiser, Gill, & Rottenberg, 2020; Tincknell, 2011).

However, it’s important to note that this constellation of the subject’s assets is distinct from Goffman’s (1981) fragmented self where people’s expressed agency aligns with their contextual roles—instead, neoliberal selfhood exists before relationships and before contexts, and the onus is on the *self* to choose how it connects with people and institutions (Gershon, 2011). This is where liberation lies under a neoliberal ideology—in the freedom to exert individual agency over the self’s traits and assets to take risk, participate in culture, and form alliances with institutions. In more tangible terms, this practice of neoliberal liberation might emerge in specific iterations of hashtag activism, consumerist empowerment narratives, and “love your body” campaigns—just to name a few examples from the contemporary feminist movement (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020).

Extending this further, neoliberal agency is deeply ingrained in discourses of sex, sexuality, and sexual education. For example, much multidisciplinary scholarship has linked together neoliberal ideologies and rhetorics of female sexual empowerment (Banet-Weiser et al.,



2020; Dubriwny & Siegfried, 2021; McCabe, 2016; Tincknell, 2011). Broadly, Bay-Cheng's (2015) work on the impact of neoliberal ideology for young women's sexuality argues that neoliberal ideology has become a "hegemonic institution of agency" (p. 283), where sexual experiences are framed as opportunity whereby any sexual wounds are subsequently both deserved and self-inflicted. More specifically, Beecham and Unger's (2019) analysis of the neoliberal female orgasm notes how the sex education platform OMGYes reframes orgasm as a skill rather than a biological phenomena, where pleasure is an investment that individuals must work at to succeed in this new sexual meritocracy. In line with pervasive neoliberal ideologies, this skill-based approach creates conditions for self-surveillance and optimization that value the transformation of the body—and the transformation of sexual subjectivity itself.

Cornfeld's (2017) introduction of "promosexuality" adds further nuance to this conversation, even though Cornfeld does not specifically locate her work in a neoliberal context. Cornfeld analyzes "booth babes" at tech expos who represent the late capitalist corporation by their (undervalued) affective labor and construction of a branded self. The "managed eroticism" (Cornfield, 2017, p. 215) of their sexualized spectacle is an explicit example of how corporations leverage sexuality in the service of capital. There is an underlayer of corporate personhood pervading their performance, where corporations seek to embody human attributes—taking on heightened cultural identities, which subsumes the individual sexual identity of the booth babe. In this context, the promosexual agent's sexualized labor helps to render "signs of sexual identity as a consumer choice" (Cornfield, 2017, p. 217). Framing sexuality as not only a choice but also a corporate brand complicates the self-branding that online sex education creators use to promote their content.

In contexts of traditional sex education, neoliberal ideologies are also present, particularly in the shifting locus of agency and discipline. Elliott (2014) argues that traditional, abstinence-focused sex education in the classroom produces a limited, endorsed subject position for students—that of the responsible sexual agent, which is “self-sufficient, self-regulating, and consequence-bearing” (p. 213). The classroom pedagogies from her sample assume the responsible sexual agent is gender neutral, white, and heterosexual. Lessons were obliquely aimed at all students, regardless of quiet inequalities present in the background—for example, men were in control and simultaneously hyper-sexual, to say nothing about how sexuality was constructed for men of color; women had to control men’s sexuality and simultaneously remain caring, submissive, and empowered, yet all received the same educational material. The neoliberal responsible sexual agent, Elliott (2014) concludes, is ultimately a fantasy who “does not have multifaceted desires, is not embroiled in relationships with others, and does not live in a world rife with persistent inequalities” (p. 221). While Kelly’s (2016) analysis of sex education rhetorics does not explicitly use neoliberal terminology, his findings substantiate those of Elliott (2014). Kelly (2016) argues that abstinence-based education produces “hyper-functional subjects invested in their own subjugation” (p. 355). In other words, both Elliott (2014) and Kelly (2016) locate a sex education that seeks to produce sexual subjects invested in their own self-discipline, personal agency, and optimization as a worker and a citizen.

Finally, neoliberal logics are also deeply rooted in contemporary conversations around social platforms, algorithms, and big data. A substantive analysis of how neoliberal logics, sexuality, and technology become entwined emerges from Righti’s (2018) critique of the dating app Tinder. Tinder, Righti (2018) argues, codifies seduction and desire into a new normative schema which capitalizes upon people’s nonlabor time. Technologies like Tinder, which help to

connect the “self” with the “other,” smooth the path to corporeal experiences, minimizing potential blockages and slowdowns in the path to a normatively successful life. But even as it makes these experiences more efficient, the gamification, optimization, and self-governing design of Tinder still serves to reinforce a neoliberal self which is “obstinate in its movement forward” (Righti, 2018, p. 114) as pleasure becomes secondary. The telos of the app becomes circulation, not romantic success.

Beyond Righti’s (2014) platform analysis, much can be said about creators themselves who participate in neoliberal logics online, as well. For example, some scholars explore neoliberal ideologies embodied by online creators who assume authority and then disperse epistemic logics. Rodney (2019), for example, points to healthy living blogs that model an internalized body regulation, in line with neoliberal governmentality goals. Predominantly women bloggers craft narratives that present *all* bodies as needing self-development, and successful maintenance and improvement of the body is derived from internalized self-management rather than medical or professional authority. In their analysis of feminist blogs, Novoselova and Jenson (2019) argue that feminist bloggers in their study also weren’t immune to neoliberal pressures of self-branding and identity management, where the self is treated as a business. Feminist bloggers frequently found a niche identity resting between microcelebrity and public intellectualism to craft a professional brand and navigate risky digital environments. This study, in particular, might be useful to help understand how sex education creators on TikTok perform an identity in addition to their construction of a sexual episteme that navigates these branded, neoliberal ecologies.

This is all to demonstrate how neoliberal ideologies can help shape discourses of agency, sexuality, and technology. As I proceed to locate and analyze discourses of sex education on

TikTok, the ways in which neoliberal logics shape both the platform itself and creators' discourses on it are central to understanding how sex education videos contribute to the shape of new sexual subject positions and the strategic uptake of sexual scripts.

### **Chapter Three: Methods**

In this chapter, I discuss my orientation to rhetorical criticism in digital contexts. I then introduce a critical approach to algorithmic governance, highlighting tools I draw from digital ethnographic practice, to help understand my place in the TikTok algorithm and my process of collecting artifacts, and which build upon rhetorical practices of curation and consideration of context. I also outline #SpicyTok, the loosely-bounded community of creators and consumers of adult videos which explicitly invoke sexual, or “spicy” discourses. Then, I locate myself in this critical practice and introduce the organizational schema for both case studies of my analysis.

#### **Text and Context in Rhetorical Criticism Online**

As this is a project of rhetorical criticism first and foremost, I respond to scholars who call for the evolution of critical methods to account for online publics, emerging new medias, and changing theories of identity in digital rhetorical spaces.

Bennett and Morris (2016) advocate explicitly for a “productive criticism” (p. 2) which, grounded in Robert Ivie’s editorials two decades prior, is a call for rhetorical scholars to engage in reparative critique married with restorative potential. They argue that productive critique “actualizes the inescapability of cultural narratives, the paradoxes of ideology, the confounding powers of metaphor, and the formative possibilities of myth” (p. 3) without becoming paranoid or reductive—in other words, without losing sight of the generative potential embedded in, and created through, rhetorical texts. To this end, rhetorical criticism is not merely an intellectual exercise or abstract theory-building practice; it can attend to public acts with an eye toward productive worldmaking practices. Subsequently, this is a thesis of open possibility—I do find reductive material, sexual lacunas, and heteronormative scripts in the videos I analyze, but at the

same time, I equally attend to the rich promise of democratized and diversified sex educational practices that expose new ways of understanding rhetorical sexuality.

I also find my work grounded in practice which Finnegan (2018) calls *curation*, where the rhetorical critic's skillset is that of an "artful maker" (p. 409) who locates, filters, arranges, and imagines rhetorical artifacts to help their audience to see and theorize the relationships between text and context. Rhetorical critics as curators must be aware of power and authority but also simultaneously willing to imagine, queer, or otherwise improvise rhetoric on levels which are both individual and institutional. I read Finnegan's work as one of play and filtration—where much of the critic's work is devoted to selecting which texts should be placed in conversation together, and how. However, an essential element of Finnegan's (2018) curation is that of a "communal, contingent, constitutive practice" (p. 407), where rhetoric also must be located *in situ* with specific communities or institutions—shaping how critics find texts.

To this end, Silvestri (2016) defines rhetoric itself as "the study of *situated* discourse" (emphasis in original, p. 166). For rhetoricians working with social media specifically, Silvestri argues that context should drive method. Building from Finnegan's (2018) work, I suggest that Silvestri's addendum is that the logic grounding a rhetorical critic's work is not just that of curating texts, but also of grounding texts in contextual practice. Thus, internet texts require responsive methods beyond textual analysis alone, because internet fragments reveal themselves differently through different methods. By this, I mean that critics can attend to visual, big data, textual, circulatory, remixed, or mimetic elements of an internet text (among many other variations in the field), and each would yield a different interpretation. As such, "the rhetorical critic must be adept at tacking back and forth between broad, context-based and specific, text-based perspectives" (Silvestri, 2016, p. 165). Thus, discourse is only meaningful when

contextualized—and it is the job of the critic to engage in a contextualization process which is “recursive, beginning with the types of questions being asked and often continuing throughout the project as the critic answers, throws out, adds to, or refines her initial questions” (p. 166). My own process of contextualization for this project is dependent on several factors, discussed later in this methods section, which find critical context largely in theories of algorithmic governance. To curate videos and locate context for sex educational content on this platform, the rhetoric I attend to is not merely textual—it is also defined by metadata, visual performance, and communities’ strategies of in/visibility. It is also deeply embedded in sexual norms and scripts, algorithmic folklore, and the platform affordances of TikTok itself.

Extending this conversation of context further, Warnick and Heineman (2012) cite several canonical new media scholars (including John Jordan, Marshall McLuhan, Neil Postman, and others) who suggest that attention to online medium is about *more* than context—in fact, it is a constitutive feature of the rhetoric that people produce. While sometimes these scholars can lean toward an overly technologically deterministic view, they still contribute much to theories of rhetorical identity construction online, where technology’s relationship to agency is still an evolving ground of rhetorical scholarship. Warnick and Heineman (2012) suggest that Maurice Charland’s germinal (1987) essay on constitutive rhetoric can help scholars theorize identity on social media from a metaperspective, where users on the internet take up identity in ways that extend offline categorization schemas such as gender, age, and race. They suggest, for example, that rhetorical critics can attend to how a site or platform *itself* can be a marker of cultural identity, and how it “enables and constrains the ways in which [users] think of their identity” (p. 104). Returning to my literature review on rhetorical agency, this perspective folds in comfortably with Demo’s (2017) analysis of user-app interactions, where apps are not merely the

location of users' agency (or, in other words, the context standing behind users' agency) but rather participants in the interaction with agency themselves.

As a rhetorical critic, I adopt such perspectives to approach the platform TikTok not only as a space from which to curate artifacts, but *also* as a space in which rhetoric is co-constituted with the creators producing sex educational content. Like Silvestri (2016), I recognize that textual analysis is not enough to understand the full scope of rhetoric online; responsive methods must account for the emergence of context-based and text-based perspectives, and likewise both the local and global movement of artifacts online. Thus, below, I introduce TikTok as a platform and actor contributing to the rhetorics of this project, a theory of platform governance grounded in critical algorithm studies, and a schema for locating the “spicy subjects” of TikTok’s sex education discourses.

### **A Critical Approach to Algorithmic Governance**

A central piece of this thesis is the platform of TikTok, the location of the rhetorics I analyze. This is important because TikTok is far from a neutral space, and thus, inevitably shapes the scope and context surrounding the rhetoric that sex educators produce. The social media platform arrived in the United States in 2018, rapidly becoming one of the most popular social platforms for young people through a combination of extreme advertising to Gen Z and a lucky confluence of the COVID-19 pandemic (Zeng, Abidin, & Schäfer, 2021). Currently, the site numbers over one billion active users who each access a unique, algorithmically curated home feed called the “For You Page” (hereafter, FYP). This is how the majority of TikTok users access an “infinite scroll” of content, but users can also search for content through hashtags, follow individual creators (whose content can be accessed on a separate, periphery “Following” page), or share posts with friends through direct messaging. The FYP, however, is designed so



users do not need mass followings or even significant social cachet to go viral—there is a degree of trust from users in algorithms that will effectively predict their identities, interests, and communities. TikTok is, Boffone (2022) writes, “public pedagogy” (p. 5) given its massive influence and public accessibility.

However, TikTok is not a monolithic or equally-accessible platform, even beyond its design that segments users into sub/cultures and communities. There is emerging evidence of TikTok’s governing agendas, which include hiding, or “shadow banning” content from disabled, unattractive, or otherwise transgressive creators (Duffy & Meisner, 2022; Peterson-Salahuddin, 2022). Shadow banning is the practice of social media platforms dramatically reducing the visibility of specific creators’ posts by hiding them from discovery feeds (Duffy & Meisner, 2022). While there have long been accusations of shadow banning on popular social media platforms, including TikTok, YouTube, and Reddit, there exists a tension between informal, lay accounts of censorship and official accounts from the platforms themselves, making scholarly research on this topic difficult (Savolainen, 2022). This censorship practice, however, is just one technique of algorithmic platform governance, which refers to broader content moderation practices by online platforms. Algorithmic platform governance is defined by Savolainen (2022) as “social ordering carried out by social media platforms through the employment of automated means, blending human and machinic agency” (p. 1092). This mirrors scholarly conversations of agency from the literature review where algorithms are largely conceptualized as agentic actors on their own (Demo, 2017; Grabill & Pigg, 2012; Zook & Blankenship, 2018). Here, algorithmic governance can add texture to rhetorical processes of curation and context-building by providing a specific lens toward understanding users’ strategic interactions with platforms.

Creators producing sexual content, specifically, on social media platforms frequently encounter shadow bans, censorship attempts, and regulatory guidelines. Controversies on this topic abound—from Tumblr’s choice to ban all “sexually explicit” (NSFW) content, which included any depiction of female nipples, to OnlyFans’ resistance of its own NSFW platform imaginary, threatening the livelihoods of many of its primary creators (Pilipets & Paasonen, 2020; van der Nagel, 2021). On TikTok, which, like Tumblr, is a hub for queer, gender nonconforming, and sexual subcultures, algorithmic platform governance has the potential to disrupt and rearrange these existing communities. Creators in these communities are well-aware of TikTok’s attempts to censor, or at least provide boundaries around, content that invokes sex or sexuality, inevitably affecting not only their own strategies to disperse sex education but also my own strategies as a scholar to access their content.

To practice curation, I draw upon digital ethnographic methods which acknowledge the relevance of specific localities—including my own—in scholarly inquiry. Haliliuc (2016) coins the term “audiencing critic” to advocate for rhetorical scholars, grounded in critical ethnographic practices, to “bring [themselves] into a culturally situated and dynamic treatment of rhetorical experience that impresses on our readers rhetoric’s significance and presence” (p. 134). By utilizing practices of creative nonfiction, observation, and self-reflection, critics can become attuned to “the processes one’s co-constitution during and after persuasive discourse” (p. 137). This is particularly relevant in online contexts, where learning algorithms are co-constituted by those who engage with them—including by rhetorical scholars who use them to locate emerging rhetorical practices.

Critical algorithm studies, which is a transdisciplinary field that attends to big data and algorithms as part of situated practice (Gillespie & Seaver, 2016), necessarily complicates digital

ethnographic processes. Seaver (2017) argues that algorithms are produced by our engagement with them, changing the stakes of scholarly methods. Scholars must be aware that “we are not remote observers, but rather active enactors, producing algorithms as particular kinds of objects through our research” (p. 5). One feature of such practice might involve attending to access, which Seaver (2017) calls “a protracted, textured practice that never really ends” (p. 7). The digital field is not a monolith, but rather, a fragmented, partially-existing object where knowledge is neither omnipresent nor always the same for everyone. On a platform like TikTok, attention to users’ and scholars’ limited access to partial information is a grounding feature of the research I do.

I would like to note that this thesis exclusively attends to sex education discourse on TikTok (rather than being multi-modal or multi-sited) and thus, this is not purely a digital ethnographic project, even as I draw from this toolkit. While I certainly invoke material realities contributing to the circulation of online sex education content—including, as mentioned, the increasingly precarious state of women’s reproductive health, puritanical sex education in the classroom, and neoliberal cultural sensibilities—I do not account for fluid movement between platforms, as I am interested only in the rhetorical choices that sex educators make on TikTok. But by attending to the discursive features of my artifacts, their location embedded in a governed platform, and the material and cultural currents behind them, I draw upon diverse tools to locate and then analyze sex education practices on TikTok.

### **A Brief Overview of #SpicyTok’s Sex Educators**

Because of TikTok’s algorithmic constraints, traditional practices for collecting relevant content do not work for this project. For example, some users producing sex educational content do not hashtag or label their videos in attempt to engage in what Peterson-Salahuddin (2022)

calls “digital dark sousveillance,” leveraged primarily by marginalized communities who intend to evade detection under systems of racialized surveillance. Here, Peterson-Salahuddin draws from Browne’s (2015) reimagining of Foucault’s theories of state surveillance, where Black subjects experience “Black luminosity” at the intersection of the panopticon and the afterlife of transatlantic slavery. Dark sousveillance is defined as strategies of resistance to this racialized surveillance, where Black and otherwise racialized subjects seek to evade being watched under this system—amplified through digital technologies and big data.

To be clear: there are differing reasons for subverting platform surveillance between these cases; I am not suggesting that TikTok creators who want to produce sexual content engage with the same systems of oppression as Black and brown creators who have drawn attention to algorithmic surveillance in the past decade. However, there are a few overlapping strategies, including the spread of folk theories and algorithmic gossip, the occasional choice to favor generic instead of content-specific hashtags (e.g., #fyp alone), and the intentional blend of digital invisibility and digital visibility practices to navigate inherently risky digital terrains. Other scholars have leveraged sousveillance to attend to community protest and police response (Ellis, 2019) and queer data practices (Bridges, 2021). As a rhetorical scholar engaging with TikTok, what I draw from Peterson-Salahuddin (2022) is attention to rhetoric which is infused with sousveillance practice—where meaningful resistance is acknowledged and located in conversation with algorithmic governance processes. I consider this an extension of Silvestri’s (2016) call for rhetorical critics to attend to the “dynamics of the situation” (p. 166).

Thus, after my own attempted survey of, and exposure to, sex educational content on TikTok, I realized that there was a significant swath of videos that I would not be able to access unless they appeared on my FYP organically—that is, they were left untagged and unlabeled in a

(presumed) attempt to become digitally invisible, flying below the radar of algorithms which would theoretically ban the videos if they became visible. By leaving some videos' descriptive metadata empty, creators producing sexual content thus were probably simultaneously using and subverting TikTok's algorithms—hoping the algorithms would push their content to followers and FYPs without recognizing the sexual content itself. This is doubly true for creators facing multiple axes of oppression, such as creators who are producing sexual content *and* who are also queer, Black, or transgressive, and thus in a riskier position where their platforms are more likely to be flagged by the algorithm and they are more likely to face serious harassment if they accidentally reach certain audiences.

Some creators, rather than using no hashtags at all, use euphemistic hashtags, such as #seggseducation, #s3xeducation, #spicytime, or #intimacytips, among easily a dozen other roundabout indicators of sex content. Once I gained access to one of these euphemistic labels, it was easy to find the others, as most videos which had one hashtag also chose to include more hashtags. Most creators additionally avoid any visual performance that would raise flags, including actual photographs or depictions of genitals or naked bodies; instead, genitals are typically represented tongue-in-cheek as various fruits, including bananas and peaches; hand-waving visualizations; or benign objects such as water bottle handles—and only very occasionally as a traditional illustrated diagram. Verbally, many creators avoid saying the word “sex” at all, using euphemistic terminology like “intimate time,” “spicy time,” or “getting steamy.”

I cannot claim that my sample of TikToks will be representative of the whole sex educational paradigm on this specific social media platform, and as such, my critical gaze is epistemically opaque by nature of my own in/access. However, as Wander and Jenkins (1972)

suggested to critics fifty years ago, objectivity is not necessarily the role of the rhetorical critic. Instead, “out of his personal experience, the critic offers a view of social reality” (Wander & Jenkins, 1972, p. 450). I suggest that this epistemic opacity, in fact, can allow for a more textured reading of my artifacts—as the “critical object carries the personal experience of the critic... and its own substance that is ever beyond our grasp” (Wander & Jenkins, 1972, p. 450). Particularly in this digital context, the algorithms and I construct this rhetorical analysis together; attending to the specific platform affordances can add important nuance to my reading of sex educational content online.

Thus, let me briefly outline the trajectory of my own entry into sex educational videos on TikTok. I began this project, back in August, searching for, and engaging with, any sex educational videos I managed to access—that is, those tagged with #seggseducation, #femalesexuality, #intimacytips, #seggs, #k1nkeducation, #spicytok, and #seggsytime, among others—assuming that this would teach the algorithm that this content interested me. While this was a slow process, indicating some algorithmic reluctance to show me the videos I wanted, over many months, I *did* begin to see some videos appear organically on my FYP. This allowed me to access new euphemistic hashtags, networks of creators, and recommended content, which gave me further insight into the sex education community’s strategies for in/visibility and content which I was previously unaware of.

My own social location on TikTok certainly complicates this process. In my casual hashtag-based survey, I realized that the tagged sex education content I was initially accessing was predominantly heterosexual and relatively limited, and there are three potential reasons for this. I suspect that TikTok’s categorization of me places me in queer circles, given the queer, bisexual, and asexual content that I typically receive on my FYP—so this is one reason I might

struggle to access sex educational content, which seems to be predominantly heteronormative. Alternatively, we might also hypothesize that queer and especially queer-of-color creators are more conscious of algorithmic subversion, and thus are more well-hidden from my attempted gaze. Or a different hypothesis is that queer and queer-of-color sexual content really *is* shadow banned, preventing its appearance on the FYP and limiting its reach.

Throughout this process, I want to note that I was intentional about my own digital positionality when doing this work. That is to say: I made the conscious decision to use my personal, data-rich TikTok account, rather than attempting to create an empty TikTok account without any personal data attached for this project, which I could train to feed me sex educational videos exclusively. I believed that, just as anthropologists are trained to account for their personal historical baggage they carry into the field, I should also resist the illusion of erasing my (digital) baggage. Because it would be an illusion—there would have been little practical way to hide *all* my personal data from TikTok over the course of so many months, and I would have been left unaware of TikTok's data on me. At least, by using my personal account, I could hypothesize my own digital trajectory, acknowledging that my other research projects, my queer and asexual categorization, and my other, variously intersectional identities, all may be actively contributing to the content I was accessing.

### **Locating the Spicy Subject**



Because I am concerned with the construction of sexual agents through sex education discourses on TikTok, my attention to these videos is guided by platform structures but more critically focused on verbal, textual, and performed instructions for audiences. Locating neoliberal discourses, rhetorical agency, and technosexual subjectivity demands attention to all elements of each video—elements visually present in the video itself, but also its caption,

hashtags, audio, and overlaid text. I return to Silvestri's (2016) definition of rhetoric as "the study of *situated* discourse" (emphasis in original, p. 166)—in this case, the rhetoric of these videos is situated holistically and grounded in cues from creators that indicate who the video is intended to reach, what end goal is emphasized for their audience, and how their sex education helps to achieve that end goal.

For this project, I initially saved about a hundred videos which all invoked sex education, and then I began to search for repeated themes, messages, performances, or tensions that could speak to sexual subjectification processes. During that original collection, I had two approximate criteria for selecting videos for my sample. First, I saved and analyzed videos whose creators explicitly produce sex educational content as at least one major brand of their public profile. This captured a cohort of sex educators with relatively traditional goals—for example, including a creator like Pleasure Bhabie, whose bio reads "💎 Relationship & XEducation 💎" or Yuval Mann, whose bio reads "👉 The art of erotic love 👈." Second, every video has some degree of circulation and reach, which I accessed by taking note of its number of views, likes, comments, saves, and shares—and, arguably, its location in the algorithm. The reach did not have to be in the millions of views, but I wanted to ascertain that the videos I collected were pedagogically significant to the community interested in sex educational content—one way of assessing this is a strategy drawn from social media marketers, where I watched for engagement in the context of other metadata outcomes, such as hashtag use, views, or follower counts (Kirkwood, 2019). If a video had hundreds of saves or shares to only thousands of views, its audience was probably interested in returning to the video in the future.

However, when I became interested in sex education from creators in less traditional communities—such as BDSM educators, specifically—I realized that my initial strategy for



locating creators' sex educational brands would not work. "Sex educator" was already a loosely bounded term, but now made even more so by some creators' avoidance of any language that may signal their NSFW content or otherwise risk getting their content banned. So, when I write "sex educator," I mean that some videos in this sample are pulled from creators who are relatively anonymous and whose primary proclaimed location is that of their BDSM-specific role, but who nonetheless consistently produce educational material. For example, Daddy (@daddydommevibes) locates themselves, in their profile, only as a "D/s enthusiast." Kittysoftpaws (@senpailovesimp) says in their profile "~SFW age regression~" and the self-brand of Lord Sweets  (@sillylordsweets) is that of a "Retired k!nk creator." Some, such as Princess Nattles (@thekinkyfairy) *do* locate a more explicit educational goal—"Kink & D/s Relo Content / Fairy Princess / Educator of sorts 

While the original collection helped give me a broad overview of themes and trends in sex education, I ultimately grouped about thirty videos for each of my two case studies—some were from the original collection, some which I deliberately searched out after I figured out my chapter themes. Thirty videos represented a sufficiently diverse sampling of different voices, perspectives, and motivations for sex educational content without becoming repetitive. To be clear: I am confident that this is not a complete sample. But this is a *generative* sample to explore how these TikToks rhetorically construct technosexual agents through new digital pedagogies.



## Chapter Four: Predated Failure and Practicing Success: Production of Orgasmic Sexual Subjects on TikTok



It is difficult to write about sex scripts, sex education, or sexual content on a social media platform without addressing what is perceived as the primary goal of a sexual encounter by many: the “big O,” or orgasm, given the extent it dominates public sexual discourse and performance. In the traditional sexual script (Dotson-Blake, Knox, & Zusman, 2012), penetration that produces male orgasm is the apex of a sexual encounter. This script has roots in Masters and Johnson’s (1966) widely-adopted (and widely-critiqued) Human Sexual Response Cycle (HSRC), which privileges orgasm as the universal peak of all sexual experience. This is a trend we see replicated through various mediated channels, including porn, television, and even some research studies (Dotson-Blake et al., 2012; Markle, 2008; Olivia-Lozano et al., 2022).

However, there is widespread resistance to the traditional sexual script—feminist critiques began to attend to female orgasm and pleasure in the 1970s (Duggan & Hunter, 1996; Frischherz, 2018b). Feminist activists, entrepreneurs, and sex educators brought to the contemporary sexscape vibrators, attention to the clitoris, and woman-owned sex shops (Comella, 2017). As Frischherz (2018b) points out, public orgasm discourses unfold alongside the history of “Freudian hangover” and feminist challenge to patriarchal ideological terrain that disciplines female sexuality. By this, Frischherz (2018b) refers to a Freudian tradition which frames women’s sexuality as fundamentally mysterious—where female orgasm is a problem to be redressed, rather than a *topoi* all on its own.

Content creators on TikTok also participate in this ongoing project. Fowler et al.’s (2022) content analysis of 100 videos tagged #sexeducation or #healthclass found that 11% primarily

attended to female orgasm or arousal. “Sexual pleasure,” more broadly, was the second most common theme in the survey. While I deliberately searched for videos that subverted the sweeping and algorithmically-surveilled hashtag #sexeducation, my own search revealed a similar trend—a substantial proportion of my collected videos explicitly contained tips for their (usually female) audience to improve their orgasms.

For example, one video from the account @girlsgonebold (featuring sex educational videos from several different young woman) labels itself “How to have an amazing org@sm Part 3,” in front of a smiling woman, and then follows up with text that reads “Just have one. You can allow yourself” (Wellness for She/hers , 2021). Framed as a simple, do-it-yourself tip to achieve something “amazing,” this video implicitly suggests, in its hashtags in the caption below the video, that this tip will support “#femaleempowerment” and “#sexualempowerment” (Wellness for She/hers , 2021). The smiling, silent woman standing behind the text performs as a successful, sexually confident guide—so her audience, too, can learn to let go of their inhibitions and become empowered simply by allowing themselves. Their agency, we might say, is at its most neoliberal—all it takes to orgasm, by this logic, is a can-do attitude. The impetus to orgasm rests solely on the “you,” the sexual subject, and the only barrier to accomplishing this task is “you” rather than any external, uncontrollable, or institutional barriers.

However, not all videos are so vague. Other videos educating TikTok audiences about orgasm offer “3 tips to intensify Your @rgasms” (Yuval Mann | Erotic artistry, 2022), ideas such as “If you or your partner struggle with an O Try edging” (Moe, 2022), or even descriptive videos, such as “THIS is What a Really GREAT Orgasm Feels Like” (Alyssa Harper  , 2022). (For clarification: edging is also known as “orgasm control,” and it involves subjects stopping themselves on the cusp of orgasm, sometimes multiple times during sexual activity, to

prolong or intensify orgasm.) Most videos addressing orgasm take steps to disguise the content of their videos, avoiding hashtags explicitly relating to orgasm and using leetspeak strategies, such as replacing the letters “o” or “a” with the “@” symbol. All videos have just one person in the frame, who is usually young, conventionally attractive, and the primary educator of the account. This exempts, of course, a few accounts such as @girlsgonebold, where multiple creators participate in producing educational content for the account.

This is all to say that orgasm features prominently in these videos, and the goal often—though not exclusively—is to create sexual agents who can achieve their own spectacular orgasms with or without partners. Orgasm discourses on the app include helping (predominantly female) partners achieve great orgasms, instructing one’s (predominantly male) partner on producing the most pleasurable orgasm for their female partner, and learning tips and tricks to achieve orgasm alone. Most videos assume a heteronormative audience, though some lesbian creators speak directly to both female and male audiences who want to help their “vulva-owning” partner orgasm. Among the more progressive educators, gender-neutral and genital-specific language allows for slightly less heteronormative readings of the sexual instructions. For the purpose of this thesis, I have been mirroring the dominant language used by creators of these videos, but to be clear, there is a diversity of linguistic choices that creators use, dependent on their positionality and digital community. I do not feel that I have the authority to critique these creators’ individual lexicons, and moreover, this project’s aim is not to fact-check the sexual epistemes disseminated on TikTok—in other words, my intention is not to pick out the most accurate sex education and dismiss the rest. Instead, when excavating the discourses that lie below the surface of sex tips and advice, I will defer to creators’ language choices to avoid passing judgment on the accuracy of the messages themselves.

Underlying this broad trend, however, are tensions in this conglomerate of educational content. The primary tension I examine in this chapter is the symbolic *role* of orgasm in sex scripts emerging on TikTok, and what it says about the sexual agents consuming this orgasmic content curated in their feeds. Most videos from my sample frame orgasm as a process of intensification—instructing their audiences how to make orgasms better, longer, faster, or more pleasurable. Other videos, however, work to decentralize orgasm, where their creators resist the framing of orgasm as essential for the pleasure of their sexual agents and explicitly resist the traditional scripts around orgasm. However, regardless of professed goal of these videos, orgasm is still frequently constructed through a rhetoric of failure and healing, upholding popular narratives which paint “sex as the innermost expression of self” (Foucault, 1990, p. 161).

While my primary research question for this thesis asks how sex educational TikToks rhetorically construct sexual agents through digital pedagogies amidst algorithmic constraints, this chapter attends to a more specific facet of this question. How do specific strategies of success, in response to predated orgasmic failure, rhetorically construct a sexual subject alongside platform-specific and educator-specific constraints?

In the remainder of this chapter, I will first review the literature of the orgasmic imperative and locate it in the context of neoliberal discourses and rhetorical agency, particularly as it emerges in online contexts. Then, I will demonstrate how several videos in my sample construct a sexual subject who has already failed at orgasm. Following, I discuss two strategies creators offer for sexual subjects to achieve orgasmic success: first, that of disciplined emotional and physical healing; and second, that of ongoing epistemic accumulation. Finally, I will braid together these discourses, briefly discussing the rhetorically constructed sexual subject on TikTok, and how scripted, onto-epistemological healing of the subject, enacted through

emotional, physical, and intellectual disciplinary devices, solves the problem of predated orgasmic failure.

### **The Orgasmic Imperative**

Before introducing the orgasmic imperative, it's probably best to explain what an orgasm is. Definitions vary by the framework from which one approaches orgasm—as Frith (2015) explains in *Orgasmic Bodies: The Orgasm in Contemporary Western Culture*, a biomedical explanation, for example, would construct orgasm as a physiological stage that signals the “peak” of sexual activity. This is distinct from the behavioral frame, where orgasms are part of a socially structured pattern in a population, or the experiential frame, where orgasms are attended to based on sensory, psychic, and subjective personal experience (Frith, 2015). However, from a common vernacular perspective, orgasm usually means “the sudden, involuntary release of sexual tension” (Nagoski, 2015, p. 251). It is an undeniably bodily experience.

Nagoski's (2015) widely-acclaimed *Come As You Are: The Surprising New Science That Will Transform Your Sex Life* is a useful heuristic to understand how contemporary sex researchers and instructors frame orgasm. In the interest of transparency: I encountered Nagoski's (2015) book following a recommendation from a licensed sex therapist; I have received the same book recommendation many times since, which lends credence to its cultural power in the context of this project. Nagoski (2015) clarifies that her approach to orgasm is one of nonconcordance—that is, the universal physiological markers of orgasm first theorized by Masters and Johnson (1966), including uterine contractions, lubrication, and increased blood flow, can differ from an individual's *subjective* experience of orgasm. In this way, it is clear that the frameworks that Frith (2015) outlined do not necessarily exist without tension—no one approach to orgasm perfectly captures the many unique and subjective experiences of orgasm.

These differing approaches to orgasm provide useful linguistic context for the sex education that is produced in TikTok videos from my sample. Most creators adopt a behavioral frame of orgasm (concerned with closing the “orgasm gap,” for example), and a few take a more experiential approach, concerned with pinpointing and sharing their exact knowledge of the *feeling* of orgasm.

The orgasmic imperative, however, refers to the trend of the past two decades that constructs orgasm not only as a pleasurable *option* for the sexual body, but also as a *requirement* for the sexual subject’s pleasure. As Frith (2015) writes, “the *presence* of orgasm takes on symbolic significance” (emphasis in original, p. 22), and women, especially, are encouraged to perceive sexual success through a binary presence-absence frame, where one either orgasms or does not. Thus, one is sexually successful or one is not. However, the perceived pleasure from orgasm is not necessarily the end goal of a successful sexual encounter—as Barker, Gill, and Harvey (2018) write, the orgasmic imperative is “a powerful discourse that positions orgasms as vital for good sex and relationships... often constructed as *right*, particularly for women, whose orgasms are presented as mysterious and elusive” (emphasis in original, p. 141). Orgasm, from this perspective, is necessary for a healthy relationship with another and even oneself, and *not* orgasming is a dysfunction of the individual or the relationship. This public preoccupation with orgasm epistemologies participates in a broader neoliberal tradition, where sexual pleasure is a rational goal which can be achieved with skill, knowledge, and individual lifestyle change (Frith, 2015).

Orgasm thus becomes entwined with identity. On the one hand, scholarship has established the neoliberal transformation of women into the “sexual adventurer” who achieves sexual enlightenment via the development of sexual knowledge, rejection of feelings of shame or

insecurity, and increasingly specialized orgasmic experiences (Harvey & Gill, 2011). However, on the other hand, men, whose own orgasms have been historically guaranteed, instead experience the neoliberal drive to become “sexual champions” (Stibbe, 2004, p. 46) of their female partner’s orgasmic experience, making *her* orgasm to assert their *own* masculinity (Frith, 2015). There are also nuances of identity that are constructed around the type of orgasm that a woman achieves—for example, Gilliland (2009) found that women who experienced female ejaculation considered it a significant part of their sexual identity.

The orgasmic imperative helps to explain why TikTok sex educators are so concerned with orgasm—they, and their audience, are immersed in a culture which for decades, has decreed that the presence of orgasm is the marker of sexual success which supersedes all other markers. And sexual success, from a neoliberal perspective, is necessary for female empowerment and individual sexual liberation. The rhetorical deployment of models of failure and success surrounding orgasm, however, is where I see tension between a neoliberal sexual agency always at risk of failure and a broader cultural ethos of ongoing personal transformation.

### **The Problem is You’ve Already Failed**

Most sex educational videos from this project’s sample assume that the sexual subject has already failed at something essential. Implied in these videos is the subject who lacks knowledge or skill, which the creators of these videos hold, and that this knowledge is necessary for the achievement of sexual success. For example, several videos open by introducing a problem that they will subsequently solve. Moe (2022), for example, begins with text overlaying the video itself, which reads “If you or your partner struggle with an O / Try edging.” Another video from yanique\_bell (2022) begins with the text “Finding it Hard to Orgasm?” before proceeding to



discuss how she helps her clients through emotional healing and specific techniques to achieve “orgasmic potency.”

The language in these videos grabs the attention of any individual who encounters a problem the creators introduce: that of failing to achieve orgasm, or struggling disproportionately to reach it. In line with Frith’s (2015) description of the orgasmic imperative’s emphasis on presence-absence, these videos are concerned with the sexual subject’s absentee orgasm.

However, other creators’ videos assume that their audience *can* orgasm, but do not experience the *optimal* orgasm, attaching value to more nebulous concepts of quality or intensity. These videos, too, assume that the sexual subject has already failed. For example, Inner.eros (2022)’s first words are “Let’s talk how to have more intense climaxes,” while Ali Gomulka’s (2022) video begins with “So the reason that so many women have been led to believe that their body isn’t capable of feeling orgasm via penetration is because they believe that in order to have an orgasm, it’s about hitting a certain spot.” In Inner.eros’ (2022) case, implicit is the assumption that an orgasm which is not intense is worth fixing. Because orgasm signals sexual success, the degree of success is dependent on the quality of orgasm, and subsequent instruction will exaggerate the success that the sexual subject is capable of achieving.

In a similar vein, Ali Gomulka (2022) constructs an orgasmic hierarchy, where women who cannot achieve orgasm via penetration are also experiencing a problem. Failure is not about whether or not an individual orgasms; it is also about the capability of a woman to orgasm from a diversity of physiological experiences. In this case, successful sex occurs when “orgasmic energy does not come from one particular spot; it comes from anywhere that connects you to this arousal” (Ali Gomulka, 2022). Failure is implied in the opening of her video, where women have allegedly been deceived by popular messaging which divorces orgasmic potential from

penetrative activity. (For context, many of her other videos address orgasm in a similar way, instructing women on how to achieve orgasm without a vibrator or challenging popular statistics denouncing penetrative orgasms.) In each of these videos, a tension is established between reliance on a particular kind of orgasm, and the success that emerges from the ability to orgasm from internal, or vaginal, stimulation, privileging heterosexual penetrative encounters. The instructional subject of her videos does not hold the knowledge she is prepared to dispense—they have already failed by consuming cultural mores which teach them to orgasm from non-penetrative activity alone.

Each of these videos present orgasm—sex, more broadly—as a problem to be solved. The sexual subject emerging from these discourses is one who is missing something essential from their attempts to achieve sexual success. In some ways, this is predicated upon the failure inherent in neoliberal subjecthood; the subject is always at risk of individual failure, which drives much of their movement forward (Dardot & Laval, 2013). And this failure, rather than being systemic or institutional, represents a quality of the individual, who does not have the necessary knowledge, skills, or emotional capacity to achieve successful orgasm.

In a twist that is likely representative of ongoing sex positivity movements, some creators instead suggest that the failure of the subject is not predicated on their inability to orgasm or orgasm well, but rather, their desire to do so at all. Moe (2022), for example, like Ali Gomulka (2022), frames her video as responsive to a popular sex education trend, but in this case, on the tendency for sexual subjects place too much pressure on their ability to achieve orgasm at all. Moe (2022) directly addresses those who struggle with orgasm, imploring them to stop “putting so much emphasis on the idea that you have to finish for sex to be successful... because that isn’t a good indicator.” Instead, Moe (2022) reframes the “point of sex” as one of fun, comfort, and

joy, critiquing those (specifically queer women) who brag about their ability to always make their partners orgasm. Whitney (2022) claims that those who focus too much on “getting close [to orgasm]” during sex end up pushing away their orgasm, and instead should choose a new mantra, such as “does it feel good? How long can it feel good?” Implied in her video is criticism of sexual subjects who are focusing on the wrong part of sexual activity, who are “stuck in their head” and thus “miss the journey” of the sexual experience (Whitni, 2022). Here, we see the promotion of similar strategies as previous creators, where emotional discipline—conscious reframing of the sex act, in these cases—paves the way to sexual success. Without passing judgment on the quality of any one video’s recommended skills for sexual success, it is interesting to note that regardless of the purported goal of instruction, the methods to achieve that goal are frequently similar in terms of the starting point each creator assumes of their sexual subject.

This problem-centric framing of orgasm is an extension of a deficit model of sexuality. The deficit model frequently frames nonnormative positionalities as experiencing problematic sex which needs to be fixed. The deficit model, for example, has historically pathologized older adults’ sex practices (Connor et al., 2019), LGBTQ populations (Peel et al., 2022), Black sexuality (Hargons et al., 2018), and young women’s contraceptive use (Hanbury & Eastham, 2015). While scholars operationalize “deficit” differently—some focusing on pleasure deficits, and others on risk factors—recent scholarship has begun to critique projects which assume problematic sexual practices as a starting point for inquiry.

Generously, we might read creators’ invocation of deficit as culturally responsive to limited formal iterations of sex education. It is not unreasonable to assume that the vast majority of young TikTok audiences have never received sex education that explicitly addresses pleasure,

intimacy, or even orgasm, given contemporary conservative trends in the sex education classroom (Jensen, 2010). Perhaps these creators use this assumption as a catalyzing agent for their sex education videos. Certainly, there is an epistemic lacuna regarding orgasm for many, but I would be careful not to veer too far into upholding Foucault's repression hypothesis—orgasm epistemes are accessible almost everywhere outside of the classroom context, and decades of scholarly and lay press writings have been dedicated to solving the “mystery” of women's orgasm, in particular (Frith, 2015).

However, more cynically, we might also read creators who assume a deficit attempting to take advantage of the ethos of TikTok, which privileges affective circulation, the re/production of cultural identity, and individual visibility. Sensationalizing a problem—for example, framing sex as a “struggle,” (yaniqye\_bell, 2022), a problem of “disconnect,” (Ali Gomulka, 2022), or an experience everyone “deserves” (Abby Jensen, 2022)—can incite stress, fear, or curiosity, compelling an individual to engage with the video. In this way, it could be a social media strategy to garner attention and popularity for the creator, many of whom monetize their content or use it to market their business as coaches, therapists, or content creators off the app. If the subject's experience of orgasm is a thing to be fixed, then the subject might be more likely to turn to the sex educator to solve their problem, which could produce financial or occupational rewards.

Regardless, framing orgasm through the lens of a deficit model—bolstered by the orgasmic imperative's cultural cachet and TikTok's own ethos—allows for a cohesive sexual identity to begin taking shape. The sexual subject who fails to achieve successful orgasm must, in a Foucauldian tradition, transform themselves by attending to disciplinary discourse that will take them from unsatisfied (or unsatisfying) partners to healing, successful, sexually free

partners. The subject is not free from failure itself, but *is* free to improve their sexual experience through the strategies that these sex educational videos promote.

Thus, the subject, who has already failed to achieve successful orgasm—whether that is orgasming at all or experiencing a specific, out-of-reach orgasm—requires scripted, onto-epistemological healing that the creator of the sex education video is prepared to provide. By onto-epistemological, I mean that the sexual subject must be healed in terms of the cultural discourse and knowledge they have consumed—the epistemology of orgasm must be retaught—and the ontology of their very *being* as a subject tangibly experiencing sex. This represents tension between the embodied sexual practices that these videos assert will produce sexual success, and the discursive construction of emotional or spiritual healing. In the following section, I will describe this tension by pointing to elements of videos which syllogistically marry physiological and emotional discipline as tools to “heal” the sexual subject and allow them to recover from their predated orgasmic failure.

### **The Solution is Emotional and Physical Self-Discipline**

Each of the videos that frame orgasm as a problem to be solved quickly follow up with the creator’s own suggested strategies for overcoming this failure, all presented in three minutes or less. Frequently, these strategies emphasize a process of healing, which demands ongoing practice, education, or training. As I argue in the pages that follow, this transforms the orgasm from a tangible, discrete goalpost to a transformative practice, which subsequently demands ongoing involvement with TikTok epistemes to allow the subject to heal.

For example, yanique\_bell (2022), who addresses the struggle to orgasm, frames her video as a response to questions she assumes her audience has about anorgasmia (medically, difficulty reaching orgasm after sexual stimulation): “what do you do about it, how did I heal it,

how can you heal it, what are some steps you can take?” The first step she suggests is to “look at emotional blocks,” including shame, disgust, relationship trauma, or sexual trauma. The second step is to consider how “you’ve trained your body to experience pleasure... for example, if you rely pretty heavily on a vibrator or a certain kind of stimulation.” After she describes these two steps, she reinserts her own role in these steps, where “along with emotional healing, I also teach techniques so that you can increase your orgasmic potency and experience pleasure in new places.” For context, this video is yanique\_bell’s most popular in a playlist of 25 other videos labeled “Orgasm Tips 🍷,” but her other videos largely contain the same broad trends of emotional healing paired with a specific, tangible skill to facilitate that healing. Tangible skills she emphasizes in this playlist, for example, include breathwork, meditation, or using a jade egg to build pelvic floor muscles.

In this way, yanique\_bell’s role as an “Intimacy & Empowerment Coach” (per her profile) is realized through this combination of instructional guidance she gives her audience. What I find interesting about this video’s focus on “heal[ing]” orgasm is the necessity of fixing an inner emotional issue and an external stimulation issue simultaneously to achieve orgasmic potency. Shame, disgust, and trauma all must be excised from the sexual subject—which requires techniques to heal from some external source, such as a paid coach, since this video and others like it do not ever address what, specifically, subjects must do to excise these emotions. Then, of course, subjects also must discipline their sexual practice, because orgasm that demands specific stimulation under specific circumstances does not allow the subject to achieve the full range of orgasmic potential. Like others, yanique\_bell emphasizes that it is a myth that clitoral orgasms are the only option for many women—stating, in the final seconds of her video, that

“you can experience vaginal orgasms... there’s a lot of misinformation out there, so educating yourself and practicing is key.”

These are trends mirrored by other videos as well—particularly creators’ decision to emphasize emotional and physical skills simultaneously. Yuval Mann | erotic artistry’s (2022) three tips to intensify orgasm, for example, included two tips for the subject’s emotional inner life, and then one tangible sex skill. First, sex demands “full body heart and mind ‘fuck yes;” second, the subject must “practice unconditional self love.” Finally, subjects should “start implementing edging into your solo and partnered sessions.”

Both yanique\_bell (2022) and Yuval Mann | Erotic artistry (2022) emphasize that their instructions to achieve orgasmic success must be part of an ongoing practice, rather than a stationary skill. Healing oneself, such as excising particular emotions associated with sexuality or practicing unconditional self-love, demand constant monitoring and disciplining from the sexual subject.

Ironically, even the more tangible skills these creators preach—such as diversifying stimulation or incorporating edging into a sexual practice—are also relatively disciplinary sex acts. Edging, in particular, is a technique emphasized by several creators—including Yuval Mann | Erotic artistry, Moe, and Dr. Tara Relationship Expert—where it is frequently painted as a tangible skill to achieve optimal orgasms, and, at the same time, is *also* emotionally transformative. Perhaps this is what makes edging so popular among sex education creators—it demands ongoing reproduction of itself to achieve success, and likewise demands self-imposed surveillance and control of orgasm. In my sample of videos, I was struck by just how many introduced edging as a tool for achieving orgasmic success.

For example, Moe (2022), suggests that edging can help a partner orgasm because it “Helps to surprise them so they don’t overthink an O,” which frames the sex tip as grounded in sexual activity but more concerned with the emotional life of the partner, who is presumably “overthink[ing]” their orgasm. Similarly, Dr. Tara Relationship Expert (2022), suggests edging as a “penis tip” to “build more endurance.” Her short video demands self-discipline, where the onus is on the subject to “stop yourself before you ejaculate” to “last longer,” although, as with other creators, this drive to lengthen and intensify orgasm is assumed rather than explained.

Edging is a useful example of sex education with a self-disciplinary emphasis, but to be clear, much of orgasm-specific advice bridging emotions and physical sensation are likewise self-disciplinary and demand ongoing work. Inner.eros’ (2022) video, aimed to produce “more intense climaxes,” suggests straightening out the body during sex, breathing deeply, and creating audible vibrations, which all help “regulate our nervous systems... while you are experiencing pleasure, you can also be healing your body’s nervous system.” While Inner.eros (2022) draws upon New-Age-ish language (“breathwork,” “connecting the throughline,” “vibrations”) to improve the quality of orgasm, it’s important to note that none of her tips are static. Practicing deep breathing, regulating one’s nervous system, and heightening one’s senses has no end point. The point is to keep doing it. Verbs like “regulate” or “be healing” are present-tense processes, not future perfect tense outcomes—in other words, “you can also be healing your body’s nervous system” indicates an ongoing experience in the present, as opposed to a grammatical choice like “you will have healed your body’s nervous system,” which would alternatively suggest a *complete* action. This produces a sexual subject perpetually in a state of improvement and practice, where success can only be realized through ongoing effort rather than the completion of a stable goal.



Ali Gomulka's (2022) video describing how women can achieve orgasm from penetration also involves similarly spiritual language, where subjects are told that "a lot of women don't feel pleasure internally... due to disconnect from the body, disconnect from the pussy, disconnect due to shame, conditioning, or just never actually knowing how to reconnect, or perhaps trauma." Here, we see rhetoric describing alignment between the physical sensation of pleasure to emotional connect (or lack of pleasure to emotional disconnect, as the case may be). Linguistic choices, where "orgasm is energy" or penetration being capable of "waking up internally the vagina walls" not only privileges penetrative orgasm, but also suggests that orgasm is best when subjects train themselves to experience pleasure without "reliance on one certain spot" through a combination of emotional healing and physiological discipline. New Age discourse is leveraged to marry emotional, spiritual, and physical disciplinary techniques in service of achieving optimal—in this case, penetrative—orgasm.

Through the discourses in these videos, we see the transformation of orgasm from an acute skill to a holistic practice concerned with mind-body alignment. While the tools promoted are different, and the discourse of these creators draws upon diverse linguistic traditions, in each case, orgasm is less an issue of acute physical sensation and more an issue of practice and discipline.

This finding mirrors the primary argument in Beecham and Unger's (2019) criticism of the online sex education platform OMGYes, which is that the neoliberal decontextualization of female orgasm helps to mobilize it as a tool for self-improvement. In their article, they discuss the curation of orgasm as a skill that users are expected to learn, which extends the Foucauldian notion of "bodies as manageable entities" (p. 51). Failure, they argue, is not necessarily about

failing to orgasm (or failure to make someone orgasm) itself, but rather failing to devote effort to master the skills of orgasm.

In this section of my analysis, I have found a similar transformation of orgasm, where failure is not the inability to orgasm, but rather the unwillingness to improve one's approach to orgasm even while the purported goal varies. Success is defined differently among creators—some privilege penetrative or vaginal orgasms; some celebrate divorce from the orgasmic imperative; some intend for audiences to achieve more “intense” orgasms—but orgasm ultimately remains a practice, not a stationary event. Like Beecham and Unger (2019), I would suggest that sexual subjectivity is driven by logics of optimization, self-discipline, and overcoming perceived failure (which, of course, always already exists). Beyond Beecham and Unger (2019), however, I would argue that the unique platform affordances of TikTok—and creators' own goals for producing content on the app—contribute to a further telos of sex education, where sexual subjectivity is also driven by the expectation of ongoing epistemic accumulation to achieve orgasmic success.

### **The Solution is Epistemic Accumulation**

Successfully achieving orgasm—however that looks, per the creators' stated goals—requires more than emotional and physical self-discipline. Sex educators also suggest that beyond disciplining the self to transform orgasm into a skill, subjects also must adopt an attitude of accumulation to sex educational content. This form of education is never meant to end. As I will show, this is driven, in part, by the ethos of TikTok as a platform and also, in part, by creators' explicit goals as educators. Taken together, we see orgasm as an ongoing epistemological project—extending the focus on emotional and physical discipline, an intellectual discipline emerges from these videos, as well. The transformation of the mind and

body demands consumption of the *right* kind of intellectual content, which rests on rhetorical constraints produced by the platform of TikTok itself.

Many videos proclaim that education is a key to orgasmic success—and not just any education, but specifically the consumption of correct, ongoing education. Ali Gomulka (2022), for example, criticizes the way “women have been led to believe that their body isn’t capable of feeling orgasm via penetration,” and spends her video challenging this assumption. When her audience consumes her instruction and reawakens their body, they will ultimately “understand that orgasm is just the energy” and then subsequently “understand that you can feel pleasure and your big O pleasure from any area in your body.” Framing her education in this way—where orgasm results from newfound understanding, which drives the achievement of specific sensations—encourages audiences to undergo an intellectual reorientation towards orgasm, where they must fundamentally change how they think of it. The way Ali Gomulka underscores her core training, which is that orgasm should be understood as “energy” by sexual subjects, demonstrates the extent to which Ali Golmulka believes disciplinary tools must be driven by ongoing epistemic change, a process of “understanding” orgasm.

Similarly, yanique\_bell (2022) also promotes education as one key to orgasmic success, where her video ends by pointing out “there’s a lot of misinformation out there, so educating yourself and practicing is key.” These verbs imply ongoing effort—at no point is there an end to “educating” or “practicing.” So successful sexual subjects should not just discipline (“heal”) emotions around their sexuality or train their body’s response to physical sensations, but also intentionally engage in an ongoing process of self-education.

In addition to similar calls to continue educating oneself, many creators also frame their own relationship to this ongoing educational project. Yuval Mann | Erotic artistry (2022), for

example, before delivering his three orgasm-intensifying tips, pitches his own services, asking his audience to “consider pressing that follow and checking out my other work; I always have exciting stuff for you.” Of course, under this paradigm, Yuval Mann | Erotic artistry is continuously producing new content, implying that “erotic intelligence” is a never-ending intellectual project—in which his audience should engage. Dr. Tara Relationship Expert (2022) likewise ends her video with a similar call to “follow me for more penis tips.” While not all videos contain such explicit suggestions to follow their creator, many do include brief pitches from the sex educator, reminding audiences that they are consuming content from a person who is also a brand. Beyond representing a particularly neoliberal approach to entrepreneurship not unlike Cornfeld’s (2017) “promosexuality,” (performed erotics leveraged to represent a corporation) this is also obviously a financially motivated call. Ongoing education is not only theoretically beneficial to the sexual subject, but also participates in TikTok’s localized economy where both the creator and the platform are intensely motivated to keep users on the app. And what better way to hook users than by dangling yet-out-of-reach information, where the information is not only a curiosity, but also essential for successful performance of sexual subjectivity?

Algorithmic governance, where curated feeds are designed to grab users’ attention and not let go, throws a unique wrench in these sex educational projects. On the one hand, TikTok is motivated to attract and retain audiences and creators by constructing intensely personalized feeds to deliver any content that they are categorically expected to desire. On the other hand, TikTok is not a sexually neutral space, and its agendas are carefully, *technically* opposed to ‘not safe for work’ (NSFW) content and communities. As an “audiencing critic” (Haliliuc, 2016, p. 134) who has struggled to access this content, I would note that these warring desires—to keep

sexual content off the app, but to keep users interested in sexual content on—motivate sex educational creators to produce sexual subjects who are never satisfied with their sexual knowledge. Likewise, by framing orgasm not as a tangible, acute experience but rather as a symbolic and ongoing project, the ethos of the app remains untouched, and creators' ability to carefully subvert algorithmic surveillance becomes essential to fulfill TikTok's contentious goals.

Thus, just as Righti's (2018) analysis of Tinder points out that the app's telos is circulation rather than romantic success, we might draw a parallel, where TikTok's telos is *accumulation* rather than (sexual) success. Orgasm is only successful when it is a process of epistemic accumulation—not only must the sexual subject discipline themselves offline, in their embodied and emotional lives, but they also must discipline themselves on the app—chasing, curating, consuming, and consolidating sexual knowledge.

What is interesting about Righti's (2018) approach to Tinder is her argument that Tinder provides a semblance of comfort against the overwhelming amount of information available when life is constructed as a "limitless investment in the libidinal" (p. 110). In a way, Tinder creates a problem and then solves it by becoming an "incipient system of knowledge" (p. 111), formalizing experiences like love or desire by proxy of algorithmic calculations made on behalf of its users. Nothing subversive about sexuality is actually capable of emerging on the app—by design, the mechanisms of Tinder create a subject who is satisfied only with their movement forward. Similarly, I would also call TikTok an "incipient system of knowledge" where sex education cannot be sexually subversive by nature of the platform's own design and driving telos. The demand for epistemic accumulation to achieve optimal orgasms is oriented not toward

pleasure or success but rather toward knowledge that is ever out of reach, which demands ongoing commitment to finding and deploying it.

Righti (2018) critically asks: “In what ways does the paroxysm of absolute perceptive knowledge seek to colonize other life domains that include the interrelational rapport with the other?” (p. 106). In other words, what are the epistemological consequences of a neoliberal platform which constructs itself along a vector which proclaims to contain all knowledge, but carefully presents that knowledge in piecemeal, curated fragments for its categorized audience? Because subjects are categorized by the algorithm—no one but myself, I assume, is consuming such a messy megacosm of videos describing orgasm, for example—there is a drive to consume the most correct, most true, most useful information on orgasm, which demands intense filtration on the part of the platform, sex educator, and sexual subject. In the context of sex education on TikTok, how are subjects’ unique epistemes colonized by TikTok algorithms producing, concurrently with creators, a technosexuality obsessed with (the right kind of) accumulation?

Discipline, again, is at the core of this question, where accumulation is not neutral but must be achieved through disciplined consumption of sex educational content. Calls to follow creators for “more penis tips” (Dr. Tara Relationship Expert, 2022) or increased “erotic intelligence” (Yuval Mann | Erotic artistry, 2022) frame the sexual subject as epistemologically active in their own sexuality, under the guise of neoliberal freedom to accumulate information which will produce the most sexual success. Swept away by this illusory freedom is the role of TikTok’s algorithms, presenting these videos to curated FYPs—the invisible hand which participates in the kinds of epistemes that are accessible to each individual user. It is important to acknowledge that the freedom of epistemic accumulation is necessarily limited, particularly in cases of female orgasm, which has historically been excised from the public sphere. The sexual

subject who accumulates is rhetorically beholden to the platform, the sex educator, and their own drive to achieve orgasmic success, reproducing their own “limitless investment in the libidinal” online (Righti, 2018, p. 110).

## **Conclusion**

Somewhere between Righti’s (2018) neoliberal critique of Tinder and Beecham and Unger’s (2019) analysis of sexual entrepreneurship on OMGYes is where I locate this chapter’s intervention. Righti (2018) engages in a platform-centric criticism, grappling with the epistemological implications of Tinder as a neoliberal system of knowledge. Beecham and Unger (2019) examine how the female orgasm itself becomes decontextualized and transformed into a tool for self-improvement through the aesthetics of a particular sex education website. In this chapter, I add creators’ motivations to the conversation, where platform constraints and sex education creators together create and then solve the problem of failed orgasmic potential. I also suggest that the transformation of orgasm from acute, tangible experience into symbolic and ongoing optimization project is frequently driven by joint emotional and physical disciplinary techniques, a representative example being the practice of “edging” promoted by several creators. The demand for scripted, onto-epistemological healing of the subject, ultimately enacted through emotional, physical, and intellectual disciplinary devices, solves the problem of predated orgasmic failure.

In this, we see a sexual subject who has already failed—but who is simultaneously compelled to strive for the optimal orgasm. When the question is of TikTok’s rhetorical construction of technosexual agents, I see the rhetoric of orgasm as groundwork for this inquiry because of the orgasm’s unique cultural cachet, scholarly history, and sensitive symbolic role in online public sphere. In this chapter, I found that the less interesting question is what sex

educators on TikTok specifically promote that subjects *do* to achieve optimal orgasms—instead, more generative is that underneath all pieces of advice, the sexual subject always begins from the standpoint of having failed, and the answer to their failure primarily demands intense emotional and physical transformation alongside never-ending epistemic accumulation. Both solutions proposed by sex educators participate in the neoliberal paradigm of agency, where subjects are responsible for investing in and optimizing their skills to produce hyper-functional sexual performance—either to reach their own optimal orgasm, or to help their partner reach theirs’.

However, in the next chapter, I ask: despite these rhetorical constraints, is there space for alternative, resistive, or transgressive discourses to emerge—producing subjects not through a universalized or optimized imperative, but instead through sex education that attends to individualized experiences of power, pleasure, or desire? One of TikTok's most powerful attributes is its algorithm’s ability to delineate between, and then weave back together, hyper-specific community discourses that cater to each individual user. The result of this is a churning, changeable FYP that has the uncanny ability to categorize and reify users’ identities—but I wonder if, rather than treating this algorithmic production fatalistically, we might be able to instead consider the sex education it produces from a standpoint of innovation and restorative discursive encounters. So, proceeding, I will introduce and analyze different communities’ aftercare discourses, which perhaps will serve as a kind of aftercare of its own to the severe criticism of this chapter.



## **Chapter Five: Restorative Potential in the Discursive Transformation of Subjects Through Aftercare Discourses**

In the previous chapter, I critiqued discourses of orgasm in sex education TikToks, where orgasm represents a stance of predated sexual failure paired with an iteration of success that could only be achieved through ongoing emotional, physical, and intellectual self-discipline on the part of the sexual subject. However, I think that this critique is worth qualifying, which is the approach I will take in this chapter.

A sexual subjectivity constructed through intensely neoliberal discourses is worth raising concern over, and orgasm represents, in some ways, the apex of this discourse. However, TikTok, with all its flaws, still provides space for emerging sex educational discourses that fill a lacuna originating in the traditional high school classroom. Reductive, conservative classroom teachings rarely address orgasm with as much breadth and depth as online creators do, and that alone is worth noting—particularly in the case of feminist, queer, and transgressive discourses that appeal to marginalized communities rarely addressed in the classroom. So, this is not a project that will moralize or hand-wring about public, accessible sex education produced by disperse, rather than governmental, authorities. Instead, in this chapter, I search for rhetoric that subverts the neoliberal drive from the previous chapter to universalize and optimize sexual scripts. Specifically, I am interested in sex educational rhetoric which explicitly attends to power differentials, unique positionalities, and alternative sexual scripts.

Thus, if my first chapter focused on orgasm, it follows that the second would attend to aftercare, as another (if occasional, if community-specific) piece of the sexual script. Aftercare is a broad term with varied contextual meanings, but in the context of sexual scripts, represents the

period immediately after a sex act occurs, where a person cares for their partner(s) following sex. Originating in BDSM (Bondage/Discipline, Dominance/Submission, Sadism/Masochism) communities, aftercare generally occurs after the conclusion of a “scene,” or the explicit sexual performance where power exchange takes place (Sloan, 2015). Aftercare is not solely a psychological *or* affective endeavor, and can include eating, drinking water, communicating with one’s partner, and resting the body both immediately after a scene and, in some cases, for days afterward (Weiss, 2012). In this way, aftercare, as with other forms of play in a BDSM context, is constructed as a practice that demands bodily knowledge. Generally, aftercare is “an opportunity to alleviate the intense emotions incited by scenes” (Sloan, 2015, p. 551) to produce the dissolution of the power exchange in BDSM-specific contexts.

Some scholarship divorces, intentionally or not, aftercare from the more general period after sex—for example, Muise, Giang, and Impett (2014) study “post sex affection” as a contributor to relationship satisfaction, and Van Raalte, Floyd, and Mongeau (2021) study married couples’ experience of “cuddling” after sex. Without speculating on the language choices of scholarship in this vein, for the purposes of this project, I attend exclusively to rhetoric and scholarship which operationalizes aftercare as a specific and intentional part of some individuals’ sexual scripts. Aftercare is not, to be clear, *any* behaviors that follow a sex act—it demands more specificity, even if it may not look the same for all individuals.

Despite this general dearth of research on aftercare, some ethnographic and community-specific work touch on its importance. Matthews (2005) found in a lesbian BDSM community, for example, a major theme emerging from interviews was the important role of aftercare in “catharsis and healing” (p. 84) following sexual power exchange, which differed somewhat from previous research on male BDSM practitioners. Weiss’ (2012) ethnographic research on the San

San Francisco BDSM community notes how in their circles, aftercare has become a formalized practice, where classes and workshops for practitioners cover not just techniques and skills for specific sex acts, but also aftercare, negotiation, and scene-setting.

In the context of TikTok, aftercare emerged primarily, though not exclusively, from kinky sex educational creators. A few instructional videos focusing on aftercare appeared in my sample, prompting me to seek out more—and once I began to do so, a few more videos appeared organically on my FYP. Aftercare videos primarily recommend “best practices” to their audiences, but also frequently advocate for aftercare on behalf of sexual participants, writ large. Some videos include explicit instructions or techniques; others demonstrate, with performance, how aftercare should look. Throughout many of these videos, however, rhetorical choices construct the sexual subject differently from the optimized, universalized subject of the orgasm videos—a construction that, I will argue, occurs in part due the origins of aftercare in the online BDSM community.

In this chapter, I will introduce a brief literature review of kinky and BDSM practices, describing how aftercare represents a transgressive split from the traditional sexual script even as it remains a biopolitical endeavor. Following, I will address the rhetoric of aftercare in TikToks produced by BDSM and kinky creators, and then analyze the rhetoric of aftercare as it becomes subsumed by more traditional (re: “vanilla”) sex educators. Finally, in the conclusion of this chapter, I will briefly reflect upon the restorative rhetorical potential that lies in the collision of sexual subjects produced by these aftercare discourse.

### **Contextualizing TikTok’s Kinky Subjects**

Before explaining and analyzing the aftercare videos I pulled for this project, it is necessary to first develop the context surrounding BDSM and kink on TikTok. Because aftercare

emerges originally from BDSM communities—communities who also frequently intersect with early queer communities—the baggage the term carries is important groundwork to explain the transformation of sexual subjectivity through instructional videos utilizing the term.

BDSM would best be characterized as a *frame* of sex, rather than any specific sex acts or desires—in part because, technically, just about anything can be made sexual or nonsexual depending on the participants. Some BDSM practices tiptoe toward mainstream sexual practice—as with “soft” activities, such as handcuffing, spanking, or roleplaying. Other behaviors, though, are publicly regarded as more extreme, such as rope play, master-slave relationships, or humiliation-degradation practices. These extreme behaviors are more likely to be disseminated and stigmatized in media contexts (Weiss, 2006).

Scholars have located the frame of BDSM as one of performance of fantasy (Hoople, 1996), play-acting (Woltersdorff, 2011), serious leisure activity (Williams, 2009; Newmahr, 2011), and “intimate theater” (Bauer, 2014, p. 63). Each of these proposed frames for understanding BDSM locate, at their core, distinction between actual violence or transgression and consensual, contained sex acts. Across individual practices, the framework of BDSM generally involves three loose stages: the negotiation and scripting of a power exchange, the performance of this dynamic during a scene, and then the dissolution of the dynamic during aftercare (Sloan, 2015).

BDSM and kink are overlapping terms colloquially, but in scholarly contexts, represent different operationalized practices. Kink, in contrast to BDSM, is a broader term, usually defined as “unconventional, sensual, erotic, and sexual behaviors” (Rehor, 2015, p. 825) that usually, though not always, implies BDSM practice. Lin (2017) argues that kink represents an “aberrant other” which experiences social control and medical stigma; in other words, sexual politics and

kink deeply implicate each other, and kink experiences ongoing transformation as different sexual behaviors become normalized.

So when I refer to #KinkTok in this chapter—just as many of the creators of the videos in this chapter do—I mean a community of kinky, usually BDSM-adjacent practitioners, many of whom participate in the circulation of BDSM tutorials, thirst traps (videos that perform sexual or romantic attractiveness), kinky sexual instruction and education, or roleplay. While the videos I accessed largely appeared to be self-policing—in other words, creators are intentional about critiquing each other’s discourse and promoting what they deem safe, consensual practices—there is certainly a swath of kinky educators who, as with other sex educational creators, produce misleading content.

The sexual subject emerging from BDSM discourses has been critiqued, in a piecemeal fashion, by scholars who attend to the circulation and reproduction of kinky community norms. Fanghanel (2020), for example, analyzes the complexity and centrality of consent in BDSM practice. By putting in conversation scholarship about consent in traditional sex education and scholarship about consent in BDSM contexts, Fanghanel (2020) points out that that “grey,” (where explicit assent/dissent is nuanced and not always clear) zones of consent demonstrate areas in which the dialectical interplay of these two discourses of consent fail each other. Specifically, consent in BDSM practice occurs in the context of tension between the pushing and respecting of limits, which is at odds with mainstream discourses of stark, one-time yes-or-no expectations of consent. Fanghanel (2020) ultimately finds that in BDSM communities, the desire to adhere to mainstream discourses and nurturing a public community ethic is at odds with desire for a more neoliberal agency that negotiates risk, consent, and trust individually.

This is where aftercare can be considered responsive to these underlying tensions. Aftercare, for some, creates space to communicate after the sex act occurs, where issues of consent can be renegotiated and reflected upon (Fanghanel, 2020).

### **Aftercare, Per #KinkTok's Sexual Subjects**

Because aftercare is a term with origins in BDSM communities, it makes sense to begin this inquiry with videos produced by kinky sex educators. Videos from these creators generally, though not exclusively, fall into one of two camps: they either approach aftercare through a baseline imperative, advocating for sexual subjects to simply *do* it, or they assume aftercare is already familiar to their audience, and instead introduce or perform ways that aftercare might look.

The videos that introduce ideas for aftercare are notable in that they rarely frame the elements of aftercare through linear, achievement-oriented, or universalized language. For example, Princess Nattles (2023), through text overlaying her face, opens her video with the title “💎 Aftercare Ideas 💎,” and then lists options such as “Words of affirmation, reassurance & gratitude,” “Run them a nice bath,” “Cuddles,” “Massages,” and “Meaningful conversation.” The choice to promote a variety of acts—which range from communication to tangible, hands-on care—assume that sexual subjects are already interested in aftercare, and are open to new ideas from the creator.

Another video from Daddy (2023) also features text on the screen, overlaying the creator's dark, anonymous face. The text, titled “Aftercare” in larger font at the top, includes a mixture of both acts and discourse, such as “Remove restraints/blindfolds/etc and gently kiss marked areas” and questions like “Do you want to put on my shirt while I go get water and snacks? Here, let me cover you with the blanket’.” While these might superficially read as

imperatives—after all, unlike Princess Nattles’ (2023) video, there is no framing of “ideas” or “options” within the text—the caption below the video opens space for variety by asking “What are some ways you perform/need aftercare?” This video also includes suggestions grounded in both communication and physical acts, where one partner assumes responsibility to care for the other in a responsive way.

In this way, both videos frame aftercare as a series of partner-specific, experience-specific behaviors that should be situationally responsive. Aftercare, in this framework, is not a one-size-fits-all behavior—rather, it involves a dialectical approach, where one partner may assume responsibility but does not override or ignore the other partner’s needs. This is distinct from most “orgasm” videos discussed in the previous chapter, which demand certain acts, skills, or transformations from the subject, framed as necessary for the achievement of their goals. Here, aftercare is less an achievement to be gained through universal educational material, and instead an experience necessarily unique to each partner.

Additionally, acknowledgement of power and sex roles remains central in these videos, further denying sexual subjects the ability to universalize their desires. In this BDSM context, most creators assume the dominant partner, or “dom,” is the one providing aftercare. That Daddy’s (2023) video includes as its first suggestions listed “Remove restraints/blindfolds/etc” indicates that they assume the one in power, who is responsible for the restraining, is also responsible for the aftercare. Aftercare is framed as a responsibility of the sexual subject who has power during the scene, making clear that power difference does not immediately dissolve with the end of the sex act but rather necessitates intentional adjustment.

Some creators, however, resist the framework that assumes one partner gives, and the other receives, aftercare. Kittysoftpaws (2021) includes in their educational video, for example,

text that reads “Aftercare goes both ways. It’s for anyone, no matter the gender” and Sage <3 (2023), in the caption below their video extolling their appreciation of aftercare, notes “Doms need aftercare too tho !!!” In both cases—whether creators assume aftercare is the responsibility of the partner with power or they advocate for equivalent aftercare—power remains a part of the equation, and it is the sexual subjects themselves who presumably negotiate their exchange of power. This is one subtle way that sexual subjects of these videos appropriate a degree of agency—discourses openly assume their active role in assuming or deferring power.

What I find most notable, however, is the discourses that are absent from these videos. For example: no kinky educator in my sample defined *when* aftercare should end. Present-tense verbs speckle these creators’ suggestions—per Princess Nattles (2023), for example, sexual subjects should “get them food and drink,” “run them a nice bath,” or “put on a movie they like.” Temporality has no place in this conversation, and there is no instructional material, from Princess Nattles or others, that sets a standard of completion for aftercare.

In some ways, we might draw a comparison between this frame of temporally vague aftercare to the frame of ongoing orgasmic practice. Do both types of videos demand never-ending investment from sexual subjects, perpetuating the moving goalposts of neoliberal success? In other words, because kinky educators refrain from setting an end point to aftercare, are they encouraging aftercare in perpetuity?

I would argue not, even though both categories of videos flirt with temporal obscurity. Aftercare is not framed or performed as an ongoing, transformative practice—instead, creators simply choose *not* to determine, for others, when aftercare should end. Aftercare, here, is an acute experience immediately following, and responding to, another acute experience; it is never encouraged to permeate the rest of a sexual subject’s life. This is a subtle distinction, but worth



noting, because in this way, agency is subtly moved from the creators to the sexual subjects. Sexual subjects are encouraged, through this suggestion-based and absence-speckled framework, to determine alongside their partner when they are satisfied with the aftercare they have given or received.

Another example of this absence can be seen (or rather, goes unseen) in Lord Sweets 🍰' (2022) video performing how he gives aftercare to his partner. He asks his partner, whose top of head, faced away, is their only visible part under a blanket, “You sure you don’t want water, or juice or anything?” His partner shakes *no*. Then he asks, “What about a Red Bull?” and their head pokes up in interest. Underneath, the video’s caption reads “Already gave her fruit snacks and head pats,” and the video itself is labelled “Aftercare... for BR4TS.” By labelling itself in this way, the video emphasizes the unique, partner-specific (or arguably, role-specific) aftercare needed. But also, by discussing the aftercare that has already occurred (“fruit snacks and head pats”) and aftercare currently happening (offering water, juice, and then a Red Bull), Lord Sweets 🍰 (2022) neglects to set for himself, his partner, or his audience, an end point to the experience. There is no concrete goal to be achieved, or experience to be intensified—this part of the sexual script is negotiated together, as partners, in the moment.

To be clear: the aftercare discourse is not wholly liberated and free from the imperatives that marked the majority of orgasm videos from the previous chapter. Aftercare, in several of these videos—particularly those which advocate simply for aftercare to exist—is framed as a right of every sexual subject. Bilbo Shaggins (2023), for example, performs a mock conversation with a “fellow ‘D0m’,” acting out his fury and disgust when they claim not to believe in aftercare. In the caption below the video, he instructs: “Aftercare is PARAMOUNT to any kind of play. Anyone who neglects us shouldn’t be allowed anywhere near you.” Here, aftercare is

framed through an imperative, instructing sexual subjects that they *must* incorporate this practice into their sexual play.

It might be worth noting, though, that the absence of aftercare is predominantly framed as a failure on the part of the sexual subject's partner, not the sexual subject themselves, unlike the success/failure model of orgasm discourses. The "aftercare imperative" in these videos alleviates the burden of aftercare from the person who is presumably most vulnerable, or most entitled to it. Bilbo Shaggins (2023) expresses anger toward an external source, where the one who should be receiving aftercare is a victim, rather than a perpetrator, of the failed sexual encounter. Kittysoftpaws (2021) goes so far as to write "Anyone who won't give you aftercare isn't deserving of you and isn't worth the time"—the partner, in this scenario, not "you," the sexual subject, is at fault.

In sum: throughout these videos, we see alternative discourses of sex education emerge. Specific behaviors contributing to aftercare are largely framed as suggestions, not requirements for successful completion of the act. Situational responsiveness and partner-specific dialectics are privileged over a universalized, one-size-fits all skillset. Responsibility towards one's partner is emphasized, suggesting attention to power dynamics that is in line with traditional negotiations occurring in BDSM contexts. And there is an absence of temporal instruction, where sexual subjects assume agency for determining where and how aftercare ends.

Aftercare discourses from kinky sex educators are not wholly removed from dominant neoliberal sexual discourses, of course. We still see threads of this discourse in simple imperatives for aftercare, where aftercare is constructed as a necessity, and a right, for *all* sexual subjects. In all of this, aftercare is still largely a practice that demands individual responsibility to

communicate and practice, although a dialectic between two individuals is emphasized more so than pressure placed on a single individual.

However, in the following section, I will analyze aftercare discourses that do *not* arise from kinky, BDSM sex educators, and instead are produced by more traditional, or in BDSM lexicon, “vanilla” educators. Here, it will become apparent that there is nothing unique to the script of aftercare that protects it from the discourse that dominates orgasmic instruction.

### **The Neoliberal Transformation of Aftercare**

The traditional sex educational standpoint, in this case, refers to material produced by creators whose primary goals are that of general sex education, not sex education for transgressive online communities, such as the BDSM community. These creators brand themselves through profile taglines like “Sexual Empowerment for High Performers (Sēx Empowerment Coach, 2022), “sex educator” (Madeline Gregg, 2022), and “Online intimate health services ☯” (SH:24, 2021). While occasionally, they acknowledge the queer or BDSM roots of aftercare, they more commonly frame it as a practice for everyone, regardless of their specific sexual experience or positionality. These creators also frequently reintroduce heteropatriarchal norms into aftercare discourses, where, rather than aftercare being either shared or a responsibility of the partner with more power during the sex act, it is something for “ladies,” (Adam Lane Smith | Psychology, 2022; Bridgette Ann intimacy coach, 2023) or “girls” (Hannah & James, 2022).

Of course, there is a range of aftercare discourses from these creators, some of which are more similar to the discourses produced by BDSM creators in the previous section, and some of which are further removed. In this section, I will outline some thematic differences appearing in

this new set of aftercare videos, but will additionally take care to point to videos that bridge the gap, representing a combination of discursive sex educational techniques.

Notably, several aftercare videos in this sample begin from a stance of failure, just as many of the orgasm videos did in the previous chapter. Adam Lane Smith | Psychology (2022), for example, opens his video by stating “Ladies, you are not getting enough aftercare and it’s one of the reasons you don’t feel fulfilled and bonded in your relationship. Have you heard about aftercare? If not, let me tell you.” The explicit assumption, here, is that women’s relationships are unsatisfactory because their sex lives do not include this essential piece of the sexual script—what is, in this creator’s words, “supposed to be the second part of the experience.” There is also the underlying assumption that women are missing this pivotal piece of information, and it is the sex educator’s job to explain and dispense the correct information before the sexual subjects. This is not a co-created episteme; rather, the sexual subject’s agency is tied up in their ability to consume and deploy the instructions of the sex educator.

Bridgette Ann intimacy coach (2023) introduces her video similarly, with the refrain “Ladies, three after intimacy care tips you may be missing.” And Hannah & James (2022) perform a scene captioned “Aftercare is so important 💕,” where “Girls after seggs” mournfully wonder “if he’s using me for my body...” after their partner turns away from them and opens up their phone. The missing piece of the puzzle—aftercare—is introduced in the caption, but the scene of the video is one of loss, disappointment, and loneliness, a representation of “Girls” failed sexual experience. At the margins of this video, left unseen, is the role aftercare will play in fixing this failed, sad relationship.

A hallmark of traditional sex educators’ videos addressing orgasm is that sexual subjects are constructed along lines of predated sexual failure. Orgasm and aftercare, of course, have

different roots. The orgasmic imperative frames orgasm as not just a biological peak, but also as symbolically significant (Frith, 2015), while aftercare is a relatively nascent sexual practice without much (as of yet) scientific basis that seems to only recently have reached mainstream audiences. But that aftercare seems to be joining the ranks of sexual practices which subjects must be disciplined towards achieving feels significant. And, of course, the science is emerging. Adam Lane Smith | Psychology (2022) is the only creator to introduce science through his explanation of aftercare (by vaguely gesturing toward oxytocin), representing a rhetorical strategy that constructs, and normalizes, a sexual practice through Frith's (2015) biomedical frame.

Beyond the tendency to reintroduce failure to aftercare, also unique to these videos is their instructional quality, where behaviors or techniques of aftercare are no longer suggestions, but instead essential, ordered acts. For example, Sēx Empowerment Coach (2022) tells sexual subjects to “give [their partner] hugs, give them cuddles, give them kisses, and then perform hygienic care once you're done.” This linear, step-by-step process is written in the imperative, where this sex educator holds knowledge that the sexual subject must receive and then deploy to correctly accomplish aftercare for their own and their partner's wellbeing.

Some creators do take a softer approach where, like BDSM educators, they frame aftercare through a series of options. Madeline Gregg (2022), for example, says that “you still need to do [aftercare] after doing regular smeggs. So, that can be pillow talk, that can be cuddling, that can be watching a show together... It doesn't really have to be complicated and it doesn't have to be a big thing; it just has to be something that reconnects you with your partner after a really intimate act.” While Madeline Gregg notes the variety of potential aftercare behaviors that may work for sexual subjects, her addition of a concrete goal to aftercare—

reconnecting with one's partner—transforms this discourse into one that mimics orgasmic discourses from the previous chapter. There is now something in this discourse which will serve as a landmark for success—aftercare is successful when the sexual subject feels reconnected with their partner, because, apparently, they *disconnected* during sex.

In a similar vein, Lydia | Sexual Health Educator (2022) also stresses aftercare's important role, listing what she wants out of the experience: "Bring me a towel, some vitamins, some tea, some water, something... there's nothing wrong with checking in and seeing how you can support each other best after such an intimate activity." By framing the types of aftercare that *she* wants, this creator emphasizes the individual needs underlying the experience before expanding the role of aftercare to something both partners should do to "support each other." Unlike Madeline Gregg (2022), Lydia | Sexual Health Educator (2022) refrains from proposing a goal of aftercare, instead choosing to flatly reject the framework where people "just want to shake hands and leave." In some ways, this video is reminiscent of aftercare videos from BDSM educators, where her discourse contains fewer hallmarks of disciplined, success-oriented, failure-averse sex education.

In each of these videos in my sample, it is worth noting that the impetus for successful aftercare rests on their direct audience—the "you" in these videos—and moreover, aftercare is primarily an individual experience. Sexual subjects are responsible for, in some cases, their own aftercare, and in others, their partner's aftercare. In either case, however, it is up to the individual sexual subject to best decide what is needed and to enact it.

For example, at its most neoliberal, aftercare is an individual experience that the subject is solely responsible for to protect their own wellbeing. Bridgette Ann intimacy coach (2023) lists "three after intimacy care tips you may be missing," which include instructing women to

“always pee after intimacy,” “drink up,” and “ditch the douche and instead try Boquet, a prebiotic, pH balancing intimate tablet.” Aside from the obvious product sponsorship, much can be said about the broader rhetorical themes of agency in this video. There is no partner mentioned in this scenario—instead, the responsibility to “reduce infection,” recover from the “workout,” and “keep everything feeling fresh” rests solely on the individual (female) sexual subject. In another example, to return to Sēx Empowerment Coach (2022), individuals are told that, after they reassure their partners, they must care for themselves: “if you are giving, make sure you pee to prevent UTIs, and if you’re receiving, do an Epsom salt bath or use baby wipes.” In both videos, the sexual subject is the actor who must initiate aftercare; there is no resting and relying on their partner to give them what they need.

In the neoliberal tradition, subjects are expected to exert full agency over their lives—and so here, if they want aftercare, they must initiate the aftercare. If “you,” the sexual subject, wants “feelings of closeness” (SH:24, 2021), to “reconnect with your partner” (Madeline Gregg, 2022), or to feel “fulfilled and bonded in your relationship” (Adam Lane Smith | Psychology, 2022) *you* must communicate your needs and invest time and energy into aftercare. Adam Lane Smith | Psychology (2022) even goes so far as to instruct his female audience: “don’t check out, don’t let him jump up and play Xbox,” placing the responsibility to advocate for aftercare primarily on the female subject’s shoulders in addition to upholding a specific gendered stereotype.

Throughout these videos, we see the reemergence of specific sex educational trends discussed in the previous chapter. While the purported goals of aftercare change somewhat depending on the creator, aftercare nonetheless is transformed into a symbol of sexual failure, where subjects aren’t yet aware of what they’re missing—and where sex educators step in to inform them. These videos range from constructing aftercare along lines of instructional steps to

optional behaviors, but usually still frame aftercare as a tool to achieve some kind of sexual success, where success is frequently marked by relationship fulfillment. And finally, subjects are at their most neoliberal, most supposedly agentic in these videos—they are solely responsible for achieving the kind of aftercare they want, either for themselves or for their partners.

Aftercare, which, in the previous section, was a power-conscious dialectic that demanded situational responsiveness and individual agency to determine its completion, is now entirely different. In this new framework, aftercare is an individual responsibility to remedy relational harms that occurred during sex, which often, though not exclusively, falls on the woman's shoulders. When does aftercare end, under this new framework? I am unsure. Perhaps when she is satisfied with her relationship, when she feels optimally close to her partner—whenever that is. But the completion of aftercare, as with its initiation, is up to her—her success, and her relationship, is her own responsibility. No wonder she is so lonely.

## **Conclusion**

The transformation of aftercare I have described in this chapter is not linear. But much like the childhood game of telephone, the transformation of aftercare as a discursive sex educational project between communities represents its gradual, and accidental, evolution. Some videos found a soft middle ground; some contained hints of discourses from both BDSM and traditional sex educational communities. But the majority represented values grounded in more tangible community practices that developed—and are developing still, considering TikTok's own algorithmic constraints—along fundamentally different institutional axes.

BDSM communities, for example, tend to frame sex as fantasy, play, and theater (Bauer, 2014), where the scripting and negotiation of scene must precede the power exchange that occurs during the scene, and then the power must dissolve as participants leave behind their roles. The





role of consent, where consent is a complex and ongoing negotiation with individually-constructed nuance (Bauer, 2014; Fanghanel, 2020), is central to this frame—all participants must contribute, together, to the sexual experience. Of course, this is not to say consent never fails in BDSM contexts, or that agency is perfectly diffuse and equitably enacted. Many have written about the myriad ways BDSM communities fail to effectively redress racism, transphobia, patriarchal violence, geopolitical difference, real acts of coercion, and ongoing perpetuation of systems of oppression (Bauer, 2014; Cruz, 2015; Erickson et al., 2022; Sorin, 2022). In other words, no sexual subject is free from cultural and sexual hierarchies, no matter how diligently they create and perform in a fantasy world that constrains power and violence through negotiated consent between individuals.

However, in many ways, sex education represents an attempted balm to these issues. Sex education, for many, seems to be a fantasy of its own, where the consumption of knowledge and creation of community can together create safe, consensual, pleasurable, and loving sex. At its most superficial textual level, an idealized BDSM practice emerges—where whether partners are in committed relationships or not, they can trust their partner to care for them, respond to their needs, and respect their role during and after sex. Sexual agency, in this fantasy, is less demanding of each individual subject—TikTok educators share their own experiences and ideas for aftercare practices, and subjects are expected to take up sexual practice *alongside* their partner. Agency, in this paradigm, involves not just the creator, the platform, and the sexual subject, but now, too, the sexual subject's partner, a fourth agent with which to share the burden.

In contrast, traditional sex education, as previously established, has different roots. Kelly's (2016) rhetorical analysis of conservative sex education explains how institutional sex education, as a biopolitical project, discursively produces subjects to discipline their own

transgressive, creative, and erotic desires. Bodily desire, Kelly (2016) argues, transformed with the advent of the 1981 Adolescent Family Life Act, an abstinence-only educational project that, rather than censoring desire, instrumentalized it toward a re/productive end. In sum, “pleasure in a functional political language must be made to serve some purpose that transcends the individual body,” (p. 361) and this is a discourse readily apparent in sex educators on TikTok who subscribe to traditional, rather than transgressive, goals. This is most visible in the leverage of never-ending projects of success, where sexual success is ever out of reach but still demands ongoing discipline and self-transformation from the sexual subject.

Admittedly, my summary of this sex educational tradition is an overstatement, and I have picked just one tradition to highlight above all others—I have chosen, for this chapter’s overarching purpose, to group together creators with just two different individual communities and roots; those grounded in BDSM communities and those grounded in so-called traditional sex educational epistemes. But alternative lenses certainly exist. Just as an example from this chapter: Lydia | Sexual Health Educator frames her own work in her profile as “inclusive, accessible, anti-racist sexual health education,” which is quite different than Adam Lane Smith | Psychology, who claims to be an “ Attachment Specialist /  M.A in Psychology.” If I attended to rhetorical traditions in anti-racist sex education, contrasted with psychological sex education from a white, male “attachment specialist,” I am confident that this chapter would read much differently.

However, ultimately, this strategic and rather overextended grouping of creators still allows for distinct discursive traditions to rise to the surface. My curation of videos in this chapter was driven by the desire to seek out space where sex educators tried to do sexual scripts differently, and I found that aftercare’s unique roots help to create space where rhetoric can be

witnessed transforming. The uniquely situated location of these videos on TikTok—where they can, in new and interesting and complex ways, converse with each other—indicates something exciting, to me, about where sex education is headed in the future. At the risk of sounding naïve, this conversation is where I locate the “restorative possibility” (Bennett & Morris, 2016, p. 2) of this project, where this critique attempts to “suggest alternatives, not as ways of ‘fixing’ discourses once and for all, but as a means of keeping them open to rhetorical possibilities for change” (Just & Christiansen, 2012, p. 329). I am energized by the thought of a new sexual subject entering popular discourse: a subject who is power-conscious, whose agency to determine success lies with their partner and is driven less by an algorithm or a distant educator, and who is empowered to be situationally responsive, attendant to their own and others’ sexual desires.

## **Chapter Six: Conclusion: An Ongoing Search for the Spiciest Subject**

In this thesis, I explored sex education as it emerges online in algorithmed, highly diffuse contexts. This was a difficult genre of TikToks to track, but also a highly generative one—as a Gen Z scholar with my own very complex sex educational journey, I think I understand, better than most, the corners of the internet which are uniquely situated to fill young people’s epistemic lacunas that traditional classrooms frequently leave unfulfilled.

Over these chapters, I have introduced a framework to begin conceptualizing the rhetorical construction of sexual subjects under a neoliberal cultural paradigm complicated by TikTok’s algorithmic constraints. In my search for sexual subjectivity, I have encountered a mass of videos from sex educators who are each driven by their own motivations on the app—to reach a wider audience, to monetize their content, to move consumers away from the app and toward their own websites or services, to help their audience achieve some localized form of sexual or relational success—and all these videos hold, in mind, some fantasy of sex at its most idealized. Whether sex is productive, reproductive, intimate, pleasurable, fun, challenging, spiritual, or disciplined, it ultimately remains a process where individuals “place themselves under surveillance” (Foucault, 1990, p. 116) whether explicitly or implicitly.

TikTok, at this time, is perhaps the quintessential expression of surveillance—the re/production of a self on this app demands the acknowledgment of its increasingly unambiguous data collection, algorithmic constraints, and identity categorization. Its algorithms create unique feeds for each user, producing a hyper-individualized accumulation of content, but simultaneously rely upon broader, data-generated categorization schemas that supersede individual identities. Paired with a technosexuality which acknowledges the inextricability of

technology from the corporeal site of sex (Durham, 2016), it should be no surprise that it is difficult to delineate between algorithmically-curated, creator-produced, and individually-asserted sexual identity.

On some level, the epistemology of sex is marked by instability (Durham, 2016), pragmatic desires (Waskul, 2015), and platformed illusions of ongoing accumulation (Righti, 2018). But on a deeper level, I might suggest that community-specific rhetorical traditions help to co-produce a sexual subject who transcends these epistemes. The collision of conversations from various algorithmically-generated identities allows for sexual subjects to find grounding in disperse, diverse rhetorics. This sexual subject can have roots in traditions that intentionally subvert the demand to center “genital interaction” (Bauer, 2014, p. 7) during sex, or, alternatively, traditions which reify “a curated ordinariness” (Beecham & Unger, 2019) of sexual subjectivity. And sometimes both at the same time.

In Chapter Four, I established groundwork for this project, examining orgasm because of its unique cultural cachet, scholarly history, and sensitive symbolic role in the online public sphere. I found that sexual subjects are constructed along lines of predated failure and ongoing demands for success—where success can only be achieved through emotional and physical transformation and never-ending epistemic accumulation. These solutions promoted by creators, regardless of their more tangible skills or tips, remain in a neoliberal paradigm of agency, where subjects are solely responsible for optimizing their own sexual performance. In this chapter, I add to, and amend, Beecham and Unger’s (2019) analysis of OMGYes and Righti’s (2018) critique of Tinder, drawing heavily from both articles to locate my intervention in sexual subjectivity scholarship. I add to the conversation attention to creators’ motivations that help

drive emerging rhetorics on the platform, where platform constraints and sex education creators together create and then solve the problem of failed orgasmic potential.

In Chapter Five, I examined a separate part of the sexual script—that of aftercare—where two different sex educational communities leverage aftercare discourses to produce different sexual subjectivities. Aftercare’s roots in BDSM traditions mean that BDSM educators on TikTok construct a sexual subjectivity somewhat divested from the orgasmic imperative’s hyper-individualistic, neoliberal demands. BDSM creators’ videos emphasize suggestions for aftercare, rather than instructional requirements, although they generally maintain a broad imperative for aftercare writ large, particularly as performed by the partner with the most power in a sexual scene. Sexual subjects are also encouraged to embody situational responsiveness and partnered dialectics, where aftercare needs should be negotiated together, rather than asserted individually. In contrast, when aftercare discourses are subsumed and deployed by traditional sex educators, videos begin to return to the neoliberal paradigm, where gender norms, individually-achieved success, and risks of failure are reinstated by creators.

There is much to criticize about sex education on TikTok; Chapter Four demonstrated that easily. But there is also an incredibly productive space emerging, where the convergence of sexual epistememes grounded in distinct rhetorical traditions allows for the transformation of, and innovation on behalf of, the sexual subject. By curating, highlighting, and critically engaging with these discourses—pointing out what they are implying and how they are changing—I hope to contribute to this ongoing project, and encourage future scholars to do the same.

The sexual subject—particularly the *technosexual* subject—is not stagnant; I am confident that the more tangible pieces of analysis in this project will shortly be outdated, if only because of TikTok’s potential ban in the United States. (At the time I am writing this, TikTok’s

CEO Shou Zi Chew was recently questioned before Congress, and public debates about the ban are occurring across news sites, media platforms, and among young users of the app whose opinions are, to say the least, quite fervid.) A significant limitation of this project is certainly that discourses on the internet transform more rapidly than scholarship can effectively keep up with—in fact, several videos from my original sample have already been removed from the app, although whether those removals were prompted by TikTok or the original creators, I am unsure. It would be difficult to ever replicate the findings of this project, both because of this rapid transformation and circulation of discourses, and because no one else would have access to the exact body of videos I have collected for this project. I would also note, again, that my sample of videos is not complete, and in fact, speaks more to my own digital location than anything else. If future scholars were to engage in a project with similar thematic goals, where they seek out NSFW videos in a similarly algorithmically constrained space, I would be interested in their own strategies to account for their black box categorization, digital positionality, and subversion of the algorithm. In particular, I would hope that work from creators with positionalities different than my own—who, perhaps, find themselves on corners of a social media platform that I do not have access to—can expand upon some of the claims I make over the course of this project.

Beyond these limitations, however, the process through which we locate sexual subjectivity, where agency is constituted through active interplay of individual creators, the platform which organizes and disseminates content, and the subjects themselves, is where I see my primary intervention in this field. I additionally hope that I have contributed something productive in my methodology for this project, where a project with roots in digital ethnography and rhetorical criticism can be usefully contextualized with attention to algorithmic governance,

particularly when focus is on creators in subversive, transgressive, or otherwise surveilled communities.

I also note that this is, to my knowledge, the first project that attempts to bring aftercare discourses into the fold of rhetorical criticism. Research on aftercare has primarily occurred in BDSM-specific ethnographic research, and in this project, I found discourses of aftercare in a mediated public space, where it was ripe for critical rhetorical attention. In this, I participate in Fahs and McClelland's (2016) *Critical Sexuality Studies*, where I approach aftercare through their practice of "conceptual analysis" (p. 393), attending to the movement of a concept like aftercare between communities and disciplines. Likewise, I also complicate work on other disciplinary concepts, such as agency and sexual subjectivity, both of which are cited as two of the six key terms Fahs and McClelland (2016) propose in their summary of sexuality research.

### **Finally, A Note to Honor My Co-Author**

I am a neoliberal subject of the internet, just as those of my generational cohort are—as such, the criticism filling the pages of this thesis point inwards, as much as its edges are sharpened against content creators, digital communities, and TikTok's own algorithms. I am not removed from the sexual subjectivity filling these pages; rhetorics of sexual scripts, gender roles, individual responsibility, and self-optimization permeate my own consciousness in ways that I am both aware of and not. I, too, have spent many years yearning for fulfilling sex, otherworldly pleasure, and romance-novel-like intimacy between myself and my chosen sexual partners.

However, I like to think that my asexual sensibility—which, left unexplored in these pages, is nonetheless something enormous and tectonic, driving much of my scholarly writing—allows for a rhetorical criticism that peels back certain fundamental assumptions of sexual subjectivity which are sometimes left unchecked in popular discourse. I resist the notion that



people are always born with desire for sex, particularly certain *kinds* of sex; I likewise resist sex which privileges the same components of pleasure for everyone, everywhere, always. I am skeptical of imperatives, instructions, and strategic lacunas underlying sex education, designed to create re/productive subjects. These are not unique to asexuality, but still, represent a theoretical layer that bedrocks this thesis. Exploring orgasm and aftercare have both been ways to engage in this peeling, particularly because of the way both sexual scripts were left undiscussed in my own education.

Ultimately, I write *with* and *for* my teenage self. Ashley-at-seventeen had a vague, ephemeral sense that something wasn't adding up—something about herself, or her knowledge, was missing—but did not have the language to express it. Sex, as she understood it throughout her teenage years, was never really about the corporeal act—as she had no desire for *that*—but instead, sex was symbolic of something much larger than itself, which produced a looming angst that only teenagers are truly capable of achieving. It was social currency, or some sense of achievement, or an adulthood rite-of-passage that no one ever bothered to explain or justify. So she wanted it desperately; she just didn't want to *do* it. Ashley-at-seventeen, despite this tension, never deviated from the sexual trajectory that was laid out before her. Ashley-at-seventeen did everything she could to contort herself into the script she was expected to follow, and failed, over and over again—knowing it was not working, unknowing of anything different.

Ashley-at-seventeen, I think often, was right all along in her discomfort and skepticism. Through this project, I hope to begin the process of deconstructing, and reconstructing, the ways Ashley-at-seventeen understood the world, honoring the knowledge that was always present, though left unworded and unexamined. Because of this, I hope to contribute to a broader project of sex education, where we simultaneously respect the epistemes young people and alternative

communities are creating for themselves every day, and also critically examine assumptions, systems, and (frequently neoliberal) drives that twist our fantasies of sex and sex education.

This is a highly theoretical project, but not one without any practical implications. As I wrote in Chapter Five, there is much restorative potential in agency that is co-constructed along four vectors, instead of three—where a sexual subject’s partner, specifically, is deeply involved in this construction. I am taken by fantasies of sex education which privilege power-conscious dialectics, situational responsiveness, and assertions of co-constituted agency over the sex act. I am also drawn to a sexual episteme which, perhaps idealistically, incorporates knowledges grounded in a plurality of sexual communities, building an educational base greater than the sum of its parts. TikTok’s overwhelming datafication of its subjects, while certainly cause for concern, also produces epistemological convergence between communities which might otherwise struggle to share lexicons and ideas.

So, I write alongside Ashley-at-seventeen, who, I think, would have benefited from such an abundance of potential knowledge. Ashley-at-seventeen, in all her naïveté, would have believed that the accumulation of sexual knowledge would have *fixed* her—though she likely would not have realized, at the time, that there was nothing to fix. Still, Ashley-at-twenty-three honors this desire to be fixed and simultaneously wishes Ashley-at-seventeen had the tools to reach this kind of self-acceptance sooner. Perhaps the abundance of discourses she could have encountered would have helped her think differently about her sexual subjectivity, without the years of medical complications and heartbreak and angst that followed. Or, perhaps, she would have been algorithmed into a rut by TikTok, and would have continued to consume sex educational content that trained her to strive for sexual and relational success no matter her corporeal circumstances. I am not sure.

I feel compelled to write this note because, in all honesty, this thesis has struggled to find footing among tectonics that collided throughout this process—on the one hand, desire for optimistic faith in sex education, trusting a heuristic of discursive and expertise-informed sexuality, and on the other hand, an instinctual skepticism of unregulated, platform-constrained education disseminated by creators with their own unchecked neoliberal motivations—and of institutionalized sex education, just as equally.

Ultimately, Ashley-at-seventeen is as active a writer in this thesis as Ashley-at-twenty-three is, and her role as a rhetorical critic in her own right cannot go unacknowledged. I write this final note to honor her role and her early sexual sensibilities, and likewise to recognize her burgeoning awareness of the many tensions beneath the surface of her experiences. I am grateful to say that this thesis' edges, sharpened against myself *and* my younger self *and* the videos I analyze, have been less wounding than I anticipated, and more satisfying than I could have hoped.

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### **Vita**

Ashley Hay earned her B.S. in Speech Communication with a minor in Psychology from Oregon State University in 2020. After a year's break from academia spent as a bookstore events coordinator, freelancer, and creative writer, she returned to school to pursue her M.A. in Communication and Rhetorical Studies from Syracuse University, which she completed in the Spring of 2023. Ashley's time at Syracuse refined her research interests and pointed them in the direction of a/sexuality, sex education, sexual subjectivities, and identity formation online. She currently locates her work broadly within the spaces of rhetorical theory, critical media studies, and sexuality studies. With this in mind, she will begin her PhD coursework at Pennsylvania State University in Communication Arts and Sciences in the Fall of 2023.