

## **Knowledge and Expertise in the Digital Age: How People Engage With Sex Advice on TikTok**

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The proliferation of sexual discourses in the digital age, accompanied by ongoing media panics over the perceived adverse effects of online sexual content, reflects persistent societal tensions about technology's role in shaping sexual norms. While previous research has examined the spread of sexual advice on social media, there is limited understanding of how users engage with and reshape this advice. This study addresses this gap by analyzing how TikTok users interact with sex experts through a qualitative content analysis of top videos and their most-liked comments ( $n = 500$ ). Our analysis reveals 4 mechanisms by which users engage with sexual advice: (1) challenging and validating expert authority, (2) collaboratively co-producing knowledge, (3) debating norms of intimacy and pleasure, and (4) finding and sharing emotional support and solidarity.

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Through these interactions, expertise on TikTok becomes a collective and evolving form of knowledge production.

*Keywords: expertise, sexual communication, social media, knowledge production, TikTok*

Waves of media panics have accompanied the digital age, often focusing on the perceived negative effects of online sexual content on individuals and society (Giuliani et al., 2020; Page Jeffery, 2018; Robinson, 2020). From debates around the impact of pornography (McKee, 2017) to concerns over the explicit nature of sexual advice circulating on platforms like TikTok (Dolev-Cohen et al., 2024), these anxieties reflect broader societal tensions about the role of technology in shaping sexual norms and behaviors. Despite these panics, the ubiquity of digital media is transforming how people access, share, and engage with information about sexuality. Social media platforms, in particular, have become key sites for disseminating sex and relationship advice, with influencers—many of whom position themselves as self-proclaimed experts—reaching many users and sparking both interest and controversy over the nature and quality of the information they provide (Attwood et al., 2015). Sexuality is an especially interesting case for studying expertise because of the competing discourses that surround it: biology, morality, religion, politics, and culture each play a role in shaping how sexuality is understood (Parker, 2009). This multiplicity of perspectives makes sexuality a contested domain where expert authority is often scrutinized, negotiated, and challenged.

While previous research has extensively examined the role of media in advice dissemination and expertise formation in digital spaces (Avella, 2023; Hendry et al., 2022; Maddox & Gill, 2023; Southerton, 2021; Stein et al., 2022), there is limited understanding of how users actively engage with sexual advice on social media platforms. Much of the literature has emphasized structural or conceptual shifts—from broadcast to participatory models, or from formal to lay expertise—but has paid limited attention to the everyday discursive, affective, and relational practices that constitute these processes on social media platforms (for an exception to this, see, e.g., Yeo & Chu, 2017). This study aims to fill this gap by exploring how users interact with sex experts on platforms such as TikTok. By examining the interactions between experts and users, we aim to understand how expert knowledge is constructed, challenged, and redefined in these digital spaces.

We conducted a qualitative content analysis of TikTok comments ( $n = 500$ ) on sex and relationship advice videos, focusing on the most-liked responses and their associated interactions to capture how users engage with expert advice and the interactive and collaborative processes through which knowledge is co-created. To make sense of our findings, we build on scholarship in the sociology of expertise (Epstein, 2022; Epstein & Timmermans, 2021; Eyal, 2019; Timmermans, 2020) and communication studies (Albury, 2013; Attwood et al., 2015; Byron, 2015), particularly Albury and Hendry's (2023) framework, which emphasizes the ritualistic, participatory aspects of communication over the traditional transmission model.

Our analysis reveals four key mechanisms through which users engage with sexual advice on TikTok: (1) challenging and validating expert authority, (2) collaboratively co-producing knowledge, (3) debating norms of intimacy and pleasure, and (4) finding and sharing emotional support and solidarity.

These modes of engagement, while not always mutually exclusive, show how expertise in digital contexts is not simply disseminated but actively negotiated through emotionally charged and socially situated interactions. This study contributes to ongoing discussions about the evolving relationship between media and sexuality, showing how digital platforms democratize the dissemination of sexual advice while raising critical questions about the authority and credibility of expertise (Epstein, 2022). Our findings suggest that understanding audience participation is crucial for comprehending how sexual advice is negotiated and reshaped within public digital environments. Ultimately, digital sexual discourses are not only a site for negotiating intimate knowledge but also a lens for understanding broader transformations of expertise within digital participatory culture.

### Conceptual Framework

#### ***Media and Sex Advice: From Broadcast to Participation***

Intimate relationships have undergone significant transformations characterized by flexibility, democratization, and reflexivity, as highlighted by Giddens' (1992) concept of "plastic sexuality."<sup>2</sup> These changes are tied to broader trends of neoliberalism and commodification, where relationships are increasingly framed through market-driven metaphors such as investment, value, and optimization (Illouz, 2007). As Barker et al. (2018) argue, bodies, relationships, and sexual skills all become matters of training, self-management, and self-optimization. For example, this logic is evident in wellness influencers promoting "30-day intimacy challenges" or in sex toy companies marketing pleasure as part of self-care routines. This commodification mirrors the rapid expansion of lifestyle media (Arriagada & Bishop, 2021), which has contributed to the breakdown of fixed scripts about identity and relationships.

Media and technology play a transformative role in shaping understandings of sex, intimacy, and relationships (Plummer, 2015). Media acts as both a reflection of societal norms and a force that actively constructs and reshapes them (Barker et al., 2018). As Plummer (2002) notes, the modern world is saturated with "sexual stories," enabled by the proliferation of media technologies. These mediated narratives actively construct norms, desires, and practices surrounding intimate life. For instance, the proliferation of reality shows about dating, sex, and romance—such as *Love Island* (ITV, 2015–present) or *Too Hot to Handle* (Kolar et al., 2020–present)—illustrates how intimate life becomes narrated, commodified, and widely circulated as a form of collective sexual storytelling.

The relationship between media and sex advice is not new. In the past, traditional media forms, such as marital manuals, sexual health pamphlets, and advice columns, were the primary sources of sex-related information (Attwood et al., 2015). What distinguishes today's media landscape is not the presence of advice, but the participatory and decentralized ways it circulates (e.g., Reddit's r/relationship threads). Social media has reshaped advice seeking and expertise formation (Avella, 2023; Hendry et al., 2022), transforming top-down dynamics into interactive spaces where users can engage directly with advice-givers

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<sup>2</sup> Giddens (1992) uses the term "*plastic sexuality*" to describe an increasingly malleable form of sexuality freed from the imperatives of reproduction, subject to individual choice and reflexive self-expression within intimate relationships.

and other users (Garwood-Cross, 2023). This shift from static to participatory advice giving reflects changes in how knowledge and expertise are produced and consumed in the digital age (Barker et al., 2018). Maddox (2023) describes how “knowledge influencers” perform “calibrated expertise,” leveraging “social media affordances, platform dynamics, and aspects of microcelebrity to share information effectively” (p. 2744). Gamson and Hertz (2023) argue that social media platforms have upended traditional hierarchies of knowledge production by giving voice to a wider range of individuals, including those without formal credentials who draw on lived experience or lay expertise to contribute meaningful insights.

Indeed, a growing body of scholarship now challenges traditional conceptualizations of audiences as passive recipients of unidirectional information (Cocosila & Archer, 2010; Walther et al., 2018). Building on Carey’s (1992) definition of communication as a ritual—a process through which reality is produced, shared, and sustained within communal bonds—Albury and Hendry (2023) emphasize how audience engagement shapes sexual knowledge on these platforms, suggesting that communication is more ritualistic and participatory than traditional one-way transmission models suggest. This participation extends beyond passive consumption to active involvement, where users can challenge and reinforce the authority of experts. In their words, “Media is not about the transmission of information—it is about building and sustaining culture” (Albury & Hendry, 2023, p. 639). Similarly, Wagner (2006), in studying wiki forums, describes “conversational knowledge,” emerging dynamically through interaction, negotiation, and context-specific dialogue.

Digital media allows individuals to engage with diverse perspectives and access information that may not be readily available through traditional channels. Importantly, it allows people to explore potentially sensitive or taboo topics like sexual health, reducing the potential stigma or embarrassment associated with face-to-face interactions. Yeo and Chu (2017) examined how young people used supportive groups on Facebook to share personal experiences and seek advice on sexual health topics such as contraception, sexually transmitted infections, and sexual practices. Specific affordances of digital platforms, such as anonymity and the ability to connect without geographic constraints, make them particularly well suited for seeking sex and relationship advice (Simon & Daneback, 2013).

Less attention has been paid to how platforms like TikTok operate as epistemic spaces where users collaboratively negotiate, personalize, and expand the meaning of sexual advice. This occurs within a unique algorithmic and regulatory environment shaped by opaque community guidelines around sex content (Garwood-Cross et al., 2024). Additionally, the participatory nature of social media disrupts traditional models of authority, prompting a deeper examination of how expertise is negotiated and redefined in digital environments.

### ***Expertise and Knowledge Production and Dissemination***

Scholars have long argued that knowledge is not a static or universal entity, but a cultural artifact shaped by social conventions, historical conditions, and spatial contexts (Collins, 1981; Latour, 1987; Shapin, 1995). Knowledge production is intertwined with the concept of expertise, as those who claim expert status are often positioned to shape what is accepted as authoritative knowledge within a domain. Expertise, therefore, is not simply about possessing specialized knowledge, but also involves the social

and institutional power that legitimizes one's ability to define and disseminate that knowledge in a particular domain (Vogler, 2021).

In the domain of sexuality, expertise can shape and reinforce norms (Epstein, 1995). Experts act as mediators, translating specialized knowledge and influencing public understanding (Grundmann, 2017). For instance, sexual health experts, whether through one-on-one work with clients, speaking or writing in public forums, or performing professional duties, "claim the ability to say just what sexual health is, who best embodies it, and how it should be pursued" (Epstein, 2022, p. 181). This raises a central question: Who gets to be considered a sex expert? Furthermore, how do interactions between experts and audiences on digital platforms shape the production and meaning of knowledge about sex and relationships? While professional institutions play a key role in establishing expertise by conferring formal credentials, these credentials alone do not necessarily ensure credibility, which emerges through interactions between experts, their audiences, and the broader social contexts in which they operate (Mitchelstein et al., 2025; Wynne, 1992).

Complicating the issue further are the varied types of expertise one may possess. As previously noted, expertise is not a fixed individual property, but is contextually and socially constructed. It "is not a thing, not a set of skills possessed by an individual or even by a group, but a historically specific way of talking" (Eyal, 2019, p. 29). While traditional examples of experts include legal counselors and medical doctors, there are also forms of expertise known as "lay expertise," where individuals contribute advice or insight based on lived experience (Grundmann, 2017). Expertise typically coexists with knowledge from family members, friends, and peers that might complement or contradict expert knowledge (Powell, 2008). Epstein's (1995) seminal work on lay expertise demonstrates how nonprofessionals, particularly in marginalized communities, can draw from personal experiences to influence what is considered authoritative knowledge.

The increasing involvement of individuals without formal credentials in specialized domains challenges traditional notions of expert authority and blurs the boundaries between who can be considered an expert. Indeed, people create what has been termed counter knowledge, or "alternative knowledge which challenges establishment knowledge, replacing knowledge authorities with new ones, thus providing an opportunity for political mobilisation" (Ylä-Anttila, 2018, p. 4). Plummer's (2002) concept of a "sexual storytelling culture" (p. i) illustrates how personal narratives—such as coming out stories or tales of surviving sexual trauma—circulate as community knowledge that challenges institutional expertise. Therefore, this study understands expertise not as a fixed attribute or solely the domain of credentialed professionals, but as a dynamic, contextually situated process shaped by social interactions and participatory practices (see also Feinstein & Baram-Tsabari, 2024).

These discussions about diversifying expertise occur within a broader context of growing skepticism toward institutional authority and expert knowledge (Abhari & Horvát, 2025; Giddens, 1991). Eyal (2019) notes that public trust in experts, particularly in public health, is eroding. There is increasing distrust of institutions, authorities, and specialists (Aupers, 2012). This decline in public trust has been linked to broader societal trends, such as increasing economic inequality and the failure of institutions to meet public

needs (Cummings, 2014). Maddox (2023) concurs, "This turn in propagating distrust against institutions is notable and neoliberal, eschewing the systemic in favor of the individual" (p. 2730).

In this context, the struggle over who is recognized as an expert has intensified in the digital age (Afful-Dadzie et al., 2023; Clarke et al., 2003; Ross Arguedas, 2022). From lifestyle to finance advice, the number of individuals vying for expert status has grown, and the criteria for what constitutes expertise have become more varied and uncertain. Digital environments can facilitate a democratization of advice giving, offering niche advice and catering to specific communities that may be underserved by traditional institutions (Barker et al., 2018). While this democratization increases access to information, it also raises crucial questions about who is qualified to provide such advice and how audiences evaluate their expertise (Epstein & Timmermans, 2021; Wellman, 2024). Indeed, the ease with which lay knowledge is shared on digital platforms can sometimes lead to the spread of harmful or misleading information (van Dijck & Alinejad, 2020). However, as Clark and colleagues (2003) have pointed out, "The heterogeneity of knowledge sources also can be interpreted as disrupting the division of 'expert' versus 'lay' knowledges and enabling new social linkages" (p. 177).

While prior research has underscored the participatory nature of digital knowledge, especially around health and sexuality, much of this work has focused on the transmission aspect of the phenomenon—the accuracy of sexual health information and its effects (Albury & Hendry, 2023). Less is known about the specific mechanisms through which audiences negotiate and co-produce sexual expertise on social media platforms. This gap is especially salient in contexts such as the United States, where sexual education is uneven and politicized, leaving many young people with limited sexual health literacy and driving them to online platforms for advice and community (Kirkpatrick & Lawrie, 2024). By using TikTok for public engagement, these experts are actively taking on roles that position them in direct conversation with the public. Building off these scholarly traditions, we ask:

*RQ1: How do users engage with sexual advice in TikTok comment threads, and what do these interactions reveal about the dynamics of digital expertise?*

## **Methods**

### **Case**

Three reasons make TikTok a unique site for our study. First, TikTok is the fastest-growing network in the United States, used by one-third of adults in 2024 (Gottfried, 2024). Second, TikTok differs from other platforms in its focus on short, playful videos (Miltsov, 2022) and its algorithm, which curates content on the "For You Page" (FYP) based on users' viewing preferences (Schellewald, 2021), allowing certain voices and advice to gain rapid visibility. The platform has become a tool "not only to look for products and businesses, but also to ask questions about how to do things and find explanations for what things mean" (Huang, 2022, para. 13). Third, as a platform frequented by younger generations like Gen Z and Gen Alpha, TikTok has become a primary source for health information seeking (Kirkpatrick & Lawrie, 2024), even surpassing Google for search purposes among these groups (Delouya, 2024).

The United States context further amplifies TikTok's relevance. Discussions around sexuality, gender identity, and reproductive rights have a long and tumultuous history in the country, rooted in broader cultural and political struggles. Recent years have witnessed a resurgence of conservative backlash, with debates over comprehensive sex education in schools, access to gender-affirming care, and reproductive rights dominating public discourse (Beemyn, 2024). Sexuality remains a highly contested area, with discussions often polarized along political and social lines.

### ***Data Collection and Analysis***

We conducted a qualitative content analysis of TikTok comments, selecting 20 sex and relationship experts whose videos consistently garnered more than 100,000 views each. Experts were identified through popular press recommendations (Inks, 2022) and keyword searches on TikTok (e.g., "Sex Expert" or "Sex Therapist"). We reviewed their profiles and videos to determine whether their context aligned with our inclusion criteria, such as self-identification as experts in sex and relationships and coverage of topics relevant to our study. When necessary, we consulted personal websites to clarify areas of expertise.

The sample included therapists, psychologists, sexologists, coaches, doctors, or self-identified experts in the domain of sex and relationships, whose content addressed topics such as relationship advice, pleasure, kink, nonmonogamy, sexual and mental health, and violence prevention within a sexual context. Many tailored their content to specific audiences (e.g., cis women, queer individuals, and couples) and promoted external products and services (e.g., therapy, books, podcasts, sex toys). Experts had an average of 435,205 followers (range: 16.9k–2.8m). For each, we selected their five most-viewed videos (totaling 100), all in English and produced by U.S.-based creators. While our sample is limited to U.S.-based experts, TikTok's algorithmically curated For You Page (FYP) enables content to circulate beyond national boundaries. Given the platform's global user base and the exploratory nature of the FYP, the interactions we analyzed may reflect not only U.S.-specific concerns but also transnational engagements with sexual advice.

For our analysis, we collected the top five liked comments from each of the 100 videos (500 total) using comment likes as a proxy for visibility and engagement (Armin et al., 2024). While the majority of the comments analyzed and discussed in the study were drawn from this core sample, we occasionally incorporated other comments—such as creator replies or thread interactions—when these were necessary to contextualize or clarify the sampled comments. We employed thematic analysis and inductive category development (Mayring, 2000) involving iterative rounds of video review and comment reading, followed by discussions of emerging themes. Categories emerged organically and were grouped thematically, producing a coding scheme that included tags such as disagreement, gratitude, humor, sharing experiences, and information seeking. Two authors regularly met to review edge cases, refine categories, and integrate observations. This collaborative process enhanced reliability and informed the findings presented below.

### **Findings**

All comment excerpts in this section are drawn from a corpus of TikTok comments that were observed and collected between December 2023 and February 2024. We adhere to this approach to comply

with our institutional review board protocol and to minimize data retention by not storing usernames or comment-level timestamps.

We identified four recurring modes of engagement: (1) challenging and validating claims to expertise, (2) collaborative knowledge production, (3) debating norms and boundaries, and (4) finding/sharing emotional support and solidarity. These categories highlight the platform's role as a contested epistemic space, where authority, intimacy, and community are negotiated in real time.

### ***Challenging and Validating Expert Authority***

TikTok users frequently assess claims to expert authority, drawing on cues such as formal credentials, perceived professionalism, and moral or religious legitimacy. These assessments serve to validate the creator's authority to speak on a certain topic or to critique their legitimacy, revealing how audiences set boundaries around who is considered trustworthy or knowledgeable.

Concerning formal credentials, some users reference formal qualifications, such as degrees or professional certifications, to negotiate knowledge. For example, in response to skepticism about an expert's qualifications "How do you know?" (personal communication, 2023), one user did the research for the comment thread, stating, "I looked it up so y'all don't have to: Masters in Jewish Studies, Masters in Social work, Masters in Public Health, PhD in Human Sexuality" (personal communication, 2023), followed by another user who reinforced this with, "3 masters and a PhD bestie [yo]u [a]r[e] just wow" (personal communication, 2023). These comments demonstrate how users invoke formal credentials to defend an expert's knowledge when it is questioned. Similarly, in a video where an expert introduced herself as a doctor and recommended slowing the pace during sex, a user simply replied, "I agree, Doc" (personal communication, 2024), invoking a formal title as a way of acknowledging and perhaps affirming the creator's professional authority.

However, some users are skeptical of experts' authority, using credentials, or the perceived lack thereof, as a basis for critique. Comments such as "Thank you . . . I know to never hire you as a therapist" (personal communication, 2024) and "What qualifies you to say that?" (personal communication, 2024) question the legitimacy of the expert's advice, framing disagreement as a critique of the expert's professional or academic background. It is important to note that most of these experts craft their videos by introducing themselves to the audience and reiterating their credentials, often supported by profile biographies highlighting their formal qualifications (e.g., "Cert[ified] sex therapist expanding insight around love, sexuality and gender"; Tanner, n.d.). This self-presentation strategy positions their authority upfront and may shape how audiences engage with and interpret their advice.

Moral and religious frameworks can also shape how users critique or align with expert advice. Topics such as self-pleasure or nontraditional relationship practices can prompt strong reactions, as audiences assess not just the credibility of the expert, but also the moral alignment of their guidance. When advice contradicts users' values, it can trigger efforts to reframe, reject, or challenge the perspective presented, revealing how expertise is evaluated through compatibility with personal or cultural worldviews. For example, in the comment sections of a Christian sex expert (ThechristianS\*xpert, n.d.) who intertwines

discussions of religion and sexuality in their videos, several users questioned the legitimacy of her faith based on the advice she offered. One user critiqued her advice on self-pleasure by stating, "You aren't a Christian if you condone 'flying solo,'" (personal communication, 2024), challenging advice about self-pleasure from a religious perspective. Another user responded to a video about kinks and fetishes with, "Stop spreading filth and lies . . . those are not part of a healthy sex life between two married people" (personal communication, 2024). Here, the invocation of religious values serves to critique the expert's authority and reinforce a specific moral worldview, using religious doctrine to define the boundaries of acceptable sexual behavior. Sharing personal experiences often bolsters these critiques. As one user shared, "In my marriage, we only focus on intimacy after prayer—it works for us" (personal communication, 2024), positioning lived experience as evidence of moral and relational success.

Moral debates are further deepened through disagreements within comment threads with other creators. For example, in a thread on a video about sexual kinks, a user asked, "Hey . . . is it okay to enjoy true CNC?"<sup>3</sup> (personal communication, 2023). The expert responded affirmatively, "100%!!!" Another expressed concern: "It can be used as a coping mechanism but it's absolutely not a healthy one" (personal communication, 2023). Other users call out those who engage in CNC as "disturbing and not healthy," and that "to be into simulated assault is disturbing in all lights" (personal communication, 2023). Another user then backed up and expanded on the expert's advice, emphasizing, "Over half of women have CNC, and many therapists say it's perfectly okay as long as you're safe. Keyword: consent. Leave consensual adults alone" (personal communication, 2023). These exchanges highlight how moral values are drawn on and can also push the discussion beyond the expert's original video.

### ***Collaborative Knowledge Production***

TikTok users often co-create knowledge by challenging and building on experts' contributions, expanding content collaboratively. In one video, an expert explained that relationships go through cycles and that down phases are "normal." Someone cautioned, "Okay y'all, just because HEALTHY relationships go through cycles, please don't excuse abusive relationships as just a cycle bc [because] it's not" (personal communication, 2023). Following many similar comments, the expert clarified, "To be clear, I'm not talking about cycles of abuse and emotional manipulation. If your partner doesn't take ownership of their toxic behavior, seek help" (personal communication, 2023). Here, knowledge is negotiated as the expert adjusts their message in response to user feedback, clarifying the types of relationships her original advice was intended to address.

In another instance, an expert outlined a set of expectations that partners are presumed to have established by six months into a relationship. One user suggested, "Do they have any known trauma responses or triggers, and what kind of support do they need if they're set off!" (personal communication, 2023). The expert enthusiastically affirmed, "love love love this" (personal communication, 2023). Another user added, "DO THEY WANT CHILDREN? I cannot believe people don't talk about this before they commit!"

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<sup>3</sup> Consensual Non-Consent (CNC) refers to a BDSM practice in which participants mutually agree to role-play scenarios that simulate nonconsensual acts, while all activities remain grounded in explicit negotiation, trust, and ongoing consent.

(personal communication, 2023), prompting the expert to acknowledge the omission and respond, "Yikes! That should've been included" (personal communication, 2023).

Collaboration also occurs without direct expert involvement. In a video advising against marrying someone you've known for less than a year, users expanded the timeline. While one user agreed, suggesting, "I would even say 2 years" (personal communication, 2024), others pushed the boundaries further, with one user stating, "Honestly, I would even say 7 years (. . .) every relationship I've ever known either falls apart at 7 years or gets even better" (personal communication, 2024). Someone, rooted in familial experience, added, "My grandma used to say, 'your marriage changes every 7 years'" (personal communication, 2024). Another user contested the advice, countering, "That won't help . . . It's when you get married that things change. Length of dating isn't going to change that result" (personal communication, 2024). These exchanges illustrate how users apply their personal insights and observations to shape discourse, sometimes reaching conclusions that diverge from the expert's original message.

Users also add their advice through anecdotal evidence. In response to vaginal health recommendations, one user shared, "I found that eating less red meat & processed food helps with not having bad odor" (personal communication, 2023), while another suggested, "Eat healthy, no dairy, increase veggies and fruits and plenty of spring water! Oh, and no soap" (personal communication, 2023). These contributions reflect a blend of lived experience and practical advice, enabling a more collaborative form of knowledge production. Users also tend to ask follow-up questions on videos, prompting more nuanced conversations. Questions such as "Can you explain the science behind this?" (personal communication, 2024) or "What do you mean by good? Does it increase blood circulation or something?" (personal communication, 2024) reflect this curiosity. In one video, the creator does not verbally explain what she is showing; instead, the footage depicts her seemingly performing a procedure with tools on someone's groin area. Many users asked what the procedure was or what benefits it had, while others speculated and replied among themselves. In one sub-comment thread, the creator eventually clarified, "Mona Lisa Touch laser"<sup>4</sup> (personal communication, 2024). Similarly, questions such as "What's involved in the rejuvenation? What does it do?" (personal communication, 2024) highlight users' interest in contextualizing and tailoring advice to specific conditions. Many of these questions are answered by experts in the comment section or even addressed in follow-up videos, actively shaping what knowledge is produced on TikTok.

Similarly, in response to a video that problematized the "roommate phase" in a relationship, one user commented, "We just got our first place and it feels like it consists of cleaning and adulting, of course . . . losing that thrive and fun for each other :/" (personal communication, 2023), sharing their personal challenges about how the realities of domestic life can conflict with maintaining passion, resonating with the expert's content. In another example, the expert shared "green flags" in a relationship, highlighting humor as a way to diffuse tension after an argument. One user responded, "My husband farts after a fight and it ALWAYS cracks me up . . . we are children" (personal communication, 2023), which affirms how this is part of this user's relationship norms, agreeing that lighthearted moments can help strengthen intimacy. On that

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<sup>4</sup> The *MonaLisa Touch* is a laser treatment marketed for vaginal "rejuvenation." While widely advertised, its medical efficacy and safety have been contested, and in 2018 the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) issued a warning against deceptive marketing of such procedures.

same video, another user shared, "Last year I skipped your videos because they showed me how toxic my relationship was. Now, I watch them & smile knowing my new SO & I are doing it right" (personal communication, 2023). This comment reveals the user's adjustments over time. The expert's advice may have felt unattainable or even painful in the context of an unhealthy partnership, but it now resonates with the user as they align with the relational aspects it promotes.

### ***Debating Norms and Boundaries***

TikTok comments serve as forums for debating what is considered normative, acceptable, or desirable in sex and relationships, often revealing underlying ideological divides. In contrast to the previous theme, debating norms and boundaries refers to interactions where audiences negotiate the moral, cultural, or relational legitimacy of sexual practices and advice. At the same time, factual contributions often serve normative purposes, and debates about norms frequently involve the mobilization of knowledge. In this sense, the themes are analytically distinct, but empirically intertwined.

In these moments, commenters often push back against what they perceive as overly transactional, mechanistic, or prescriptive advice. Responding to a video that suggested helping with household chores to get a partner in the mood for sex, one user wrote: "Yay! More transactional sex! No thanks. I'll help the kids with homework because I'm their dad. I'm not trading homework for sex" (personal communication, 2023). Relatedly, in one video about how to keep the spark alive in long-term relationships, a user commented, "Agreed, the secret to life is making lists" (personal communication, 2023), sarcastically critiquing the expert advice. This tension appeared particularly salient within those videos that offered instrumental tips and recommendations, usually bounding sexual experiences and behaviors within the confines of specific TikTok genres (e.g., how-to, trending audios, recommendations, etc.).

Users often challenge expert advice by highlighting a disconnect between the advice given and their understanding of authentic relationships or intimacy. For instance, after an expert offered suggestions for enhancing the missionary position in sex, including acting out fantasies and to "pretend you are a porn star or a princess (. . .) whatever it is you want to be involved" (Sheva, 2022), one user critically responded:

So what I'm hearing is that we should just disassociate from reality and imagine our partner is doing something we actually do like instead??? Or just fake it and put on a performance like a [porn] star instead of doing something both you and your partner actually enjoy? This advice seems really off. (personal communication, 2023)

This comment reflects a disconnect between the advice given and the user's understanding of intimacy.

Discussions about autonomy and individual responsibility in pleasure were found to elicit debates. In one instance, an expert shared a "secret sex tip: a harsh truth" (personal communication, 2024), affirming that "you cannot make your partner orgasm, change, or love you" (personal communication, 2024). While some users sought clarification—asking, "I don't understand what you mean by your video" (personal communication, 2024)—others directly disagreed, writing: "Sorry, but you're wrong on all counts!"

(personal communication, 2024) or “Oh good, I’m glad we are all disagreeing” (personal communication, 2024). One user humorously added, “I beg to differ on the first one. 😏” (personal communication, 2024), implying that they had successfully brought their partner to orgasm. These comments reveal divergent perspectives on the dynamics of pleasure and intimacy, with some users rejecting the notion of individual limitations in favor of a more relational view of sexual and emotional fulfillment.

Yet, there were also instances where users identified with advice surrounding pleasure in relationships. One user responded to a video about dispelling sex-shaming: “PLEASURE IS NOT SHAMEFUL SAY IT LOUDER FOR THE ONES IN THE BACK HUNNIE” (personal communication, 2024). Another user shared, “As a Black woman, I’ve always felt judged for enjoying pleasure—thank you for normalizing this” (personal communication, 2024), connecting systemic oppression with their lived reality. These interactions demonstrate how users connect personal experiences with broader social conversations and understandings of sexuality, using TikTok as a space to reclaim marginalized perspectives on pleasure and intimacy.

Some of this advice reflects what Fricker (2007) terms testimonial injustice: the systematic erosion of a speaker’s authority because of prejudicial stereotypes about their social identity. When experts are dismissed not on the grounds of their arguments, but because they are women, queer, or religious, their testimony is undermined by biases that shape how their advice is received. In these cases, challenges to expertise are not simply epistemic disagreements, but manifestations of broader power relations that regulate who is granted expertise in digital spaces.

### ***Finding/Sharing Emotional Support and Solidarity***

Beyond co-creating knowledge, TikTok comment sections are spaces for emotional support and community building. Many users, especially those marginalized in other sexual health spaces (Jones, 2020), were able to share their experiences. As with the case of kinky sex, conversations about self-esteem, body image, and cultural stereotypes often surfaced in these discussions. Emotional support in these threads is not merely therapeutic or expressive—it is often inseparable from how users negotiate, validate, and generate knowledge about themselves and their social worlds. These dynamics complement and expand the more traditional understandings of health expertise, aligning with ritual views of communication (Carey, 1992), where meaning is created collectively through symbolic exchange rather than transmitted.

In one video, the expert emphasized that self-esteem is cultivated within the community, rather than in isolation. One user responded: “I always feel bad for not having more self-esteem. I’m a fat dark-skinned Black woman. According to most people, I deserve nothing and no one” (personal communication, 2024), articulating personal struggles while critiquing societal expectations. Similarly, another user expressed: “This makes me feel like I am not crazy. I am such an isolated person with little self-esteem because of the community that I had growing up” (personal communication, 2024). In another video critiquing the colonial roots of therapy, a user wrote: “[A]gree 100%. Individualistic-focused therapy and self-help are very colonial. We are meant to heal and grow in community” (personal communication, 2024). TikTok comment sections serve as communal spaces where people discuss topics often overlooked or

stigmatized in mainstream conversations and question dominant perspectives that may be rooted in racism, colonialism, or other forms of oppression.

These supportive exchanges often extend to discussions of nonnormative practices, helping to build community and reduce stigma through shared reflection and affirmation of each other's experiences. In a video normalizing sleeping in separate rooms for health reasons, one user commented, "Thank you for normalizing sleeping in different rooms. I have back problems, and the guest bed is the only place I can get relief!!!" (personal communication, 2024). Another user replied, "I totally get it. I openly started saying this to people and owning it. It took the power away. Prioritizing sleep is healthy 😊" (personal communication, 2024). In a video on colorism<sup>5</sup> and sexual health, a user wrote, "Whew! Yes I've been trying to say this but didn't have the words! Reverse colorism is not real" (personal communication, 2024), revealing how the advice aligned with their experiences and gave them the language to better articulate their feelings while expanding knowledge about the phenomenon.

In response to a video about overcoming "death grip" (a slang that describes the consequences of masturbating with too tight grip, making it hard to reach orgasm during sex), the following exchange unfolded:

User A: "My ex had this issue, and it ruined our relationship because it made me feel like I couldn't please him 😞."

Expert: "Because he created a problem where no women could . . ."

User B: "or maybe it was from the start, maybe she pushed him to start flying solo"

User A: "um what?? Wanting to give and receive pleasure, as normal people do, does not mean that's ALL you want lol"

User B: "so you were too lazy to step up your game"

User A: "and you were too lazy to stop looking at porn?" (personal communication, 2024)

The exchange ended when the expert, instead of replying, liked User A's final comment, showing support for their position. Although with minimal participation, experts can signal alignment with their user base through small platform actions (e.g., liking a comment). In another comment thread on the same video, a different interaction unfolded:

User A: "I've been with my bf for almost 2 years . . . we've tried what feels like everything to overcome this (. . .)"

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<sup>5</sup> Colorism refers to discrimination based on skin tone, in which lighter skin is privileged and darker skin is marginalized, often within the same racial or ethnic group.

User B: "Maybe he's not being truthful about not watching videos/flying solo anymore . . ."

User A: "anymore advice you can give me??"

User C: "Okay, so wrap your thumb and index finger or make a finger V around the base while hes in; squeeze tightly."

User A: "I'll try that . . ." (personal communication, 2024)

These examples demonstrate that emotional support in TikTok threads is not ancillary to knowledge; rather, it is often how knowledge is formed: through resonance, shared struggle, reframing, and response. Rather than merely offering comfort, these interactions reveal how care, critique, and co-creation are entangled processes.

### Discussion

While research has shown that expertise is increasingly negotiated in digital spaces, less is known about how this plays out in everyday social media interactions—especially around intimate topics like sex and relationships. In this study, we aimed to explore communities of sex advice on social media by analyzing how users responded to videos about sex and relationship advice from experts on TikTok, where interactive comment sections provide a platform for users to publicly engage with expert advice. The findings of this study reveal that users actively shape and challenge expert knowledge by mobilizing personal experiences and values, transforming it into a collective and evolving form of knowledge production. Through these interactions, TikTok users not only engage with experts' advice but also contribute their personal experiences, critiques, and emotional support, fostering a participatory and communal space for knowledge creation and community building. Negotiation emphasizes political, social, and cultural critiques, focusing on refining or contesting the boundaries of expertise.

One way this study advances the understanding of expertise is by showing how expertise is negotiated in domains like sexuality and sex advice, which are especially prone to contestation and co-production, given the inherently personal and normative nature of the subject. Unlike highly technical scientific domains, where more abstract expertise is often presented and perceived as absolute or objective, sex advice, necessarily "plastic" (Giddens, 1992), implicates broader and contested issues that are inherently culturally dependent. This form of knowledge production is deeply entangled with lived experience, moral framing, identity, and emotion, making it especially susceptible to negotiation, as it brings together both institutional and experiential knowledge. In other words, users engage in the "sexual storytelling culture" (Plummer, 2002, p. i), questioning, affirming, and extending knowledge in dialogue with other peers and experts on the platform. By surfacing this distinction, we highlight why sex and relationship advice is a particularly compelling site for studying the negotiation of expertise between experts and the public.

While much of the literature on expertise and health communication tends to adopt a transmission model of communication, emphasizing how information flows from expert to audience, our analysis suggests that a ritual view of communication (Carey, 1992) offers a more robust framework for understanding the communicative dynamics at play in this context. Communication here is not just about conveying facts or correcting misinformation; it is also about fostering understanding and building trust. It functions as a constitutive practice: a way of affirming identities, negotiating moral norms, and sustaining shared worldviews. In Carey's (1992) words, the model is not merely one of "information acquisition," but of "dramatic action in which the reader joins a world of contending forces as an observer at a play" (p. 20). This emphasizes the role of users in actively engaging with and reshaping expert advice (Byron, 2015). This perspective also helps explain the heterogeneous effects of sexual health interventions, in which the interplay among the intervention, the target population, and the study design shapes their efficacy (Swanton et al., 2015). Ultimately, expertise becomes fluid and context-dependent, continuously negotiated and co-produced through social interactions (Grundmann, 2017).

This rethinking of expertise has implications for communication studies, feminist theory, and sociology. Drawing on feminist standpoint theory (Haraway, 1988), we highlight how situated knowledges from historically marginalized communities—especially Black, brown, queer, women and fat individuals—circulate and gain recognition through shared storytelling and emotional validation. These practices challenge dominant, biomedical, or moralistic understandings of sexuality and replace them with vernacular, community-driven forms of epistemic authority. Yet, these spaces are not devoid of conflict, harassment, or misinformation, pointing to the tensions inherent in democratized knowledge environments (Thomas et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the implications extend to how media platforms like TikTok can foster a space for co-creating knowledge and community building. Rather than serving as a channel for disseminating expert advice, TikTok enables a participatory form of communication (Albury & Hendry, 2023). Social media can help spread advice and nurture the development of communities (Barker et al., 2018). The value of these interactions lies in their ability to disrupt traditional unidirectional power dynamics between experts and users, fostering a more inclusive understanding of expertise that reflects diverse lived experiences and realities. Our findings resonate with Feinstein and Baram-Tsabari's (2024) argument that public engagement is inherently social, shaped by epistemic networks that people draw on to interpret contested issues. Yet, on platforms like TikTok, these networks are also algorithmically mediated: The FYP curates which positionalities gain visibility, potentially amplifying some forms of credibility while marginalizing others.

Finally, this research encourages scholars and practitioners to move beyond simplistic dichotomies between "expert" and "user" or between "fact" and "opinion." It shows that digital spaces like TikTok enable a complex ecology of knowledge practices where affective solidarity, critique, and co-creation operate side by side. Expertise is not a fixed attribute possessed solely by the influencer; rather, it is a collectively embodied and dynamically constructed process. This demands that we take micro-interactions seriously, not just as epiphenomena of online discourse, but as constitutive acts that produce meaning, reinforce or contest norms, and shape communal understandings of what knowledge and expertise should be.

### ***Limitations and Directions for Future Research***

While the study of sexuality offers a window into how contested topics are negotiated in digital spaces, our findings are limited by their focus on a single domain. Future research is needed in other disciplines to see if similar patterns of expertise negotiation emerge in less contentious fields. Additionally, this analysis is based on the most-liked comments, which may introduce bias because of the algorithmic filtering of content that privileges certain voices or perspectives over others. Importantly, our sample only includes comments from people who were willing to engage publicly with these videos, meaning that the voices of those who may have felt uncomfortable or unwilling to be visible are not represented. Future studies could incorporate interviews or focus groups to gain deeper insights into how people who participate in these communities receive and interact with the information provided on these platforms.

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