

A Longitudinal Content Analysis on Sex Squad Scripts: The Entertainment-Education Approach to Comprehensive Sex Education for Adolescents S. Srinivasan¹ and A. Giuliano², ¹University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), ²UCLA School of Information and Education Studies

Abstract: Comprehensive sex education for adolescents in the United States remains a serious need but suffers from ever-changing politics. Despite the rebranding of Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage (AOUM) federal programs to Sexual Risk Avoidance programs in 2016, they still receive millions in federal funding. According to the US Department of Health and Human Services (acf.hhs.gov, 2022), nearly 95 million dollars was allocated in 2022 to programs that “implement education exclusively on sexual risk avoidance that teaches youth to voluntarily refrain from sexual activity” (Boyer, 2018). Research shows that abstinence-only sex education is associated with higher rates of teen pregnancy and does little to reduce sexually transmitted infection (STI) rates (JV Ford et al., 2019; Stanger-Hall & Hall, 2011). Conversely, comprehensive sex education demonstrates an overall decrease in sexual risk-taking behaviors (Starkman & Rajani, 2002). Specifically, theatre-based sexual health peer education has been shown to improve sexual health attitudes and behaviors (Christensen, 2014; Francis, 2010; Grewe et al., 2015; Mohandespour, 2023; Roberts et al., 2017; Taylor et al., 2022). These interventions are based on entertainment-education (Sabido, 2021) and participatory theatre (Boal, 2000) principles, which offer the unique opportunity for peer educators to model ideal behavior and performers/teachers and audience/learners alike to explore solutions within real-life scenarios in a way that traditional classroom education cannot beget, particularly abstinence-only curricula (Frank & Falzone, 2021).

The University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Sex Squad, founded in 2009, is an example of one of these theatre-based sexual health peer education programs. In Sex Squad, 8-12 college students from various academic backgrounds voluntarily enroll in a 20-week course, and are given the same prompt year to year: to create and perform a multi-media sex education show for Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) high school students. We chose to focus on the Sex Squad, which performs for over 2,000

high schoolers every year, as we were student-performers in 2023 and members of the teaching staff in 2024. Data for this paper come from scripts spanning from 2018 to 2024 and were pulled from the program’s digital archives. Current literature exists on the student-performers’ sexual attitudes, the directors and teaching staff at the university, and the efficacy of this intervention with high school students (Gordon & Gere, 2015; Heitfield, 2012; Lightfoot et al., 2013; Taggart & Taboada, 2013). However, no research has been conducted on the actual content of the Sex Squad shows, which are created from scratch year to year. **For this paper, Sex Squad acts as a case study to identify topics that have remained salient for college-age students across a fluctuating political landscape surrounding sexual health rights and education issues** (i.e., the Dobbs decision, the wavering protections of Title IX and LGBTQ+ care, not to mention the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted education as a whole, including sex education).

Preliminary findings show that in addition to covering standard sex-ed topics such as birth control methods, STIs, and consent, the student-performers choose to situate their content within larger societal commentary, including but not limited to principles of cultural relativism, gender dynamics, and the stigmatization related to these topics. This underscores the desire that adolescents have to engage in sex education that faces head-on the political context entrenched in sexual health issues among young people today, directly contrasting the often decontextualized AOUM approaches to sex education. The results of this research present a ‘white-box’ approach to adolescent sex education (Nidhra & Dondeti, 2012). By analyzing what college students turned peer sex educators choose to highlight year after year in their sex education to high school students, we can understand what sexual health topics are crucial to communicate, and focus future interventions accordingly.

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