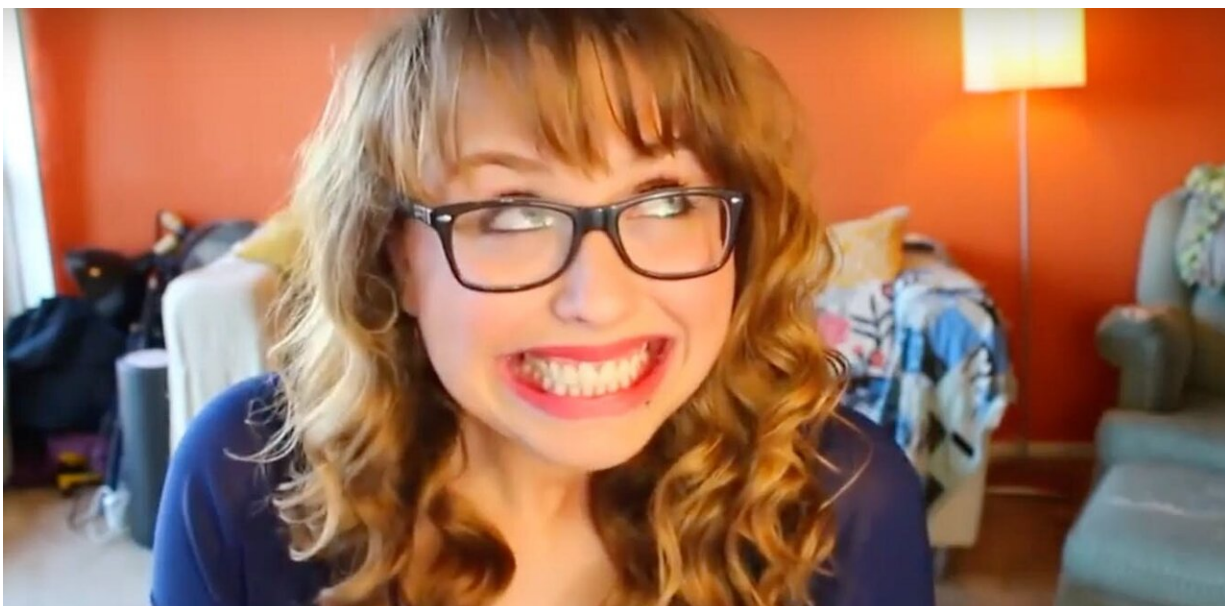


# Young women and girls are taking sex-ed into their own hands on YouTube

March 3 2020, by Chloe Krystyna Garcia

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Many young women and girls who make YouTube videos about sexual consent also examine larger cultural, legal and political contexts. Here, YouTuber Laci Green. Credit: YouTube/Laci Green

Sex education in Canadian schools continues to be highly politicized and young people are paying the price.

In Québec, for example, the [provincial sexual health curriculum has shifted a few times in the last couple of decades](#), often leaving teachers and schools [confused about the approach and the implementation](#)

[guidelines](#). In Ontario, sexual health curriculum is also at the mercy of the [province's political climate](#).

In many Canadian classrooms, [factors like inadequate teacher training and discomfort](#) impact what topics are addressed or avoided.

Unfortunately, these circumstances mean that [youth](#) may not get the information they need to engage in healthy, positive sexual relationships.

Meanwhile, sexual health resources flourish online. Studies show that [many youth seek out information about sexuality in digital spaces](#).

Within today's participatory social media platforms and networks, many of these resources are produced by youth, for youth. Young girls and women specifically are taking sex education into their own hands.

As a doctoral student at McGill University and a [sex education](#) practitioner, I have had the privilege of studying how young YouTubers use their media to talk to their audiences about sexual violence and sexual consent, both in my own dissertation [and in collaborative research](#). In these studies, I looked at a mix of YouTube videos and vlogs (or video logs) from [youth of all genders](#), aged between 14 and 30 years old.

## **Female YouTubers as sex educators**

The YouTubers in my study, including celebrity vloggers like [Meghan Hughes](#), [Laci Green](#) and [Hannah Witton](#), tackle many facets of sexual consent and sexual violence in their videos. They move beyond the oversimplified "no means no" and "yes means yes" messaging that permeates [consent education](#).

Many of the young women and girls in my samples not only define sexual consent and sexual assault, but also frame these concepts within the larger cultural, legal and political contexts in which they exist.

This is important; examining sexual violence from these broad lenses helps spotlight rape myths and victim blaming. Helping youth recognize the impacts of sexual violence and the underlining societal beliefs and structures that sustain it is a positive step towards fostering a consent culture.

I found that young women and girls are taking to YouTube for many reasons, notably, to express themselves, to educate, respond to others, share their narratives and promote social change. Within their videos, several of the YouTubers in my studies actively encourage their audiences to respect sexual consent, to support survivors and to fight rape culture—for example, by how they vote.

[Similar to young feminist activists in other online spaces](#), these YouTubers are positioning themselves as agents of change and using their vast networks to make a difference (some have hundreds of thousands of subscribers). Audiences listening to YouTube videos can therefore learn how about the skills and knowledge they need to engage in healthy relationships, and more broadly, to help prevent sexual violence.

I found that these girls and young women address [sexual consent](#) and sexual violence in creative and engaging ways. In their videos, they use emotional narratives, snappy media effects, music, examples that resonate with youth realities and informal language.

Their production choices lend to an authentic and conversational feel. In many ways, these videos offer a form of [sex edutainment](#), combining educational elements with entertainment, to attract young YouTube audiences.

## **YouTube pitfalls**

There are several benefits to learning about sexuality on YouTube: there is a large selection of videos, audiences can watch them 24/7 and there are opportunities for dialog. However, accessible features also open doors to potential harmful rhetoric.

I found that some YouTubers (male and female) perpetuate harmful stereotypes and misinformation about survivors and sexual violence. Trolls often showed up in the comments. In fairy tales, trolls lurk under bridges waiting for victims they can eat—in the digital spaces I studied, many hid under the cape of free speech and openly mocked female YouTubers, women in general and feminists.

This was not a surprise; it's well known that the internet can be a dangerous space for women and girls. [Sarah Banet-Weiser](#), professor of media and communications at the London School of Economics, correctly describes popular feminism and misogyny as warring ideologies, with digital spaces being one of their battlegrounds. YouTube is no exception.

Viewers should also be aware of the corporate nature of YouTube. As researcher and lecturer Sophie Bishop points out in her study of beauty vloggers, YouTube's "[algorithmic political economy](#)" means the platform will prioritize videos deemed more commercially viable. Some celebrity YouTubers are financially supported by companies, while others are looking for sponsorship—both of which may affect video content and performance. The algorithms also mean a diversity of voices may be left out.

## Supporting youth

Parents can help youth navigate the messages they see on YouTube and elsewhere. You and your child can also play an important role in [sexual violence](#) prevention and the promotion of consent culture in the

following ways:

- **Ask and listen.** Show interest in what youth are watching, without judgment. Taking the time to listen to them describe the spaces that they occupy can help build the trust needed to talk to them about the messages they consume.
- **Practise critical media literacy skills with your kids.** We cannot control what is said on the internet; however, we can teach youth to be critical of media messages and to be responsible content producers. [MediaSmarts](#) has tip sheets for parents.
- **Address the trolls.** Youth already know about trolls. However, it may be helpful to discuss with them how to deal with hateful online comments. There is no best solution: [learning more about it may be a good first start](#).
- **Be prepared for conversations about sexuality and sexual violence.** If you are comfortable talking about consent, have [open, non-judgmental conversations](#). If you aren't comfortable talking about sexuality or consent, or you are aware that your views may not be healthy, help your child find resources (such as [GoAskAlice](#) or [Amaze](#)) and someone they trust that they can talk to (a family member, or friend or a local community organization).
- **Teach yourself and be prepared to "unlearn."** Rape myths, victim blaming and other harmful views of survivors are perpetuated across all types of media and platforms. [Learn about them](#) and reflect on the ways that you can cultivate positive values and beliefs that support healthy relationships and consent culture.

Keep an open mind: this may require questioning your own attitudes, assumptions and behaviors. Your conversations may lead into the social and cultural realities youth are navigating every day.

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