

SenseU

THESIS

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**by
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Title page

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Vita page

Catherine “Catt” Small was born on December 28, 1989 in the Bronx, NY. She began coding at the age of 10 and designing at the age of 15. She graduated from the Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music and Art and Performing Arts as a Fine Arts major in 2007. In 2011, she graduated from SVA with a BFA in Graphic Design in 2011. With a design career spanning over ten years, she has done design work for companies of all sizes including Bedrocket, NASDAQ OMX, and Scholastic. She is currently working as a Product Designer at SoundCloud. Catt’s work has been covered by many publications including BuzzFeed, Black Enterprise, and The Mary Sue. She has spoken at schools and events across the country, including TEDxFoggyBottom.

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Dedication

To my incredible fiancé, Whitman Lawrence Scholz, as well as my loving parents, Kenneth Small and Patricia Cooper-Small, for supporting me at the best and worst of times.

Abstract

The purpose of this project is to improve sex education for young American adults. Although sexual activity has many benefits, many people in America think of sex as a negative activity. There is a dearth of information about sex in many American schools. Many people seek sex education via the internet. However, online information varies widely. SenseU, a game in which players act as a resident assistant in college, will help young adults learn about sex. Resident assistants in America often resolve interpersonal conflicts between college students. The game features 11 characters with conflicts related to issues such as sex, gender, sexuality, and consent.

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Introduction

Sexual activity has many benefits including lower risk of mortality, improved sleep, and reduced stress. Despite the aforementioned benefits, many people in America think of sex as a negative activity. This perception is caused by a lack of positive, comprehensive information about sex in schools, in mass media, and on the internet.

Some American schools are taught an abstinence-centered sex education. Regardless of proof that more sex education keeps young people from having unwanted pregnancies, America continues to uphold “abstinence-until-marriage ideology” (Whipple, Knowles, and Davis 9). Other schools deter students from having sex by focusing on the negative effects of sex, which include sexually-transmitted infections and pregnancy.

Many conservative Americans believe that shielding their children from sex education will prevent them from having sex. However, the opposite has been shown to be true.

The overall aim of the research that will be conducted is to obtain an understanding of the impact of sex education on citizens of the United states. More specifically, the objectives of this research are to:

- Understand why sex is seen as a taboo in American culture.
- Assess the quality of sex education in the United States.
- Identify and evaluate methods used to teach Americans sex education.
- Determine areas in which American sex education can be improved.

Sex education in the United States

Sex in America

Less Americans than ever are religious. Christians make up 70.6% of the United States, down from 78.4% in 2007 (Pew Research Center). Despite the increase of atheism and agnosticism in America, many Americans still abide by Christian rules and ideals. For example, all Presidents since the inception of the Constitution have been Christian. Not being Christian conveys a threat, as evidenced by the politically conservative accusations that President Barack Obama was a Muslim.

In addition to religion, personal opinions about modesty have influenced how think about sex for centuries. For example, in *Sex and God: How Religion Distorts Sexuality*, the author Darrel Ray points out that polygamy was once legal and widely practiced: "...there is nothing in the Ten Commandments about the number of spouses you can have. At the time of the writing of Exodus and Deuteronomy, polygamy was well accepted and practiced by Judaism and surrounding cultures..." (Ray 50) However, as Christianity grew more popular, its proponents pressured people to become monogamous using tactics such as psychological manipulation and the revision of history. America itself considers polygamy illegal.

Americans also experience large amounts of shame regarding sex. Ray states that shame is a tool religion often uses to manipulate and retain people. "With shame, the very thought of engaging in a given behavior evokes associations of disease and ostracism. Actually doing the behavior creates huge emotional turmoil. Feelings of filth and uncleanness may overwhelm the person, making him or her feel worthless." (Ray 56) Christianity's idols, Jesus and the Virgin Mary, were described as asexual beings in the Bible; many people including myself have gone through cycles of inspiration and guilt in an attempt to be impossibly pure like they supposedly were.

With the increase of atheism in America, many began to question the negative attitude toward sex. Sex positivity, seemingly inspired by the 1960's free love movement, emerged and reinvigorated the argument for polyamory as well as sexual freedom. As Americans abandon Christianity, the country's sexual mantra is shifting from conservative abstinence to sexual freedom.

Current state of sex education in America

Sex education in America varies heavily by state and region. Due to the fact that the American government cannot completely control states, American sex education is not cohesive or consistent. Some states encourage schools to teach abstinence-only education. Other states teach a more comprehensive sex education that covers sex organs, contraception, pregnancy, and more.

Since the quality of sex education varies by state, so do the effects...

Abstinence-only education does not work. In fact, XYZ has found that teen pregnancy rates in regions where students are taught an abstinence-only education are X% higher.

Prevention-focused sex education...

Sex positive education...

Key issues & the need for empirical research

Though there was much information about the negative perception of sex in the United States as well as the effects of abstinence-only sex education on teenage pregnancy rates, the research lacked details about other related areas. For example, there was little information about the percentage of Americans who gained most of their sexual knowledge through internet searches. Gaps in sexual education were not explored. In addition to the former, the amount of research regarding the effect of American media on the perception of sex was lacking [?].

Video games & education

The educational power of games

Games are being used to educate people at an increasing pace. Many people who grew up in the 1990's remember games like Oregon Trail and Word Muncher. Today's games are much more complex and usable. Huge companies are formed around the premise of educational technology and gaming.

Comparative analysis of existing sex education games

Unfortunately, sex is a rare topic in educational games. While most other education games are sold as apps, sex education games are often small, free, and web-based. This is likely because sex is a topic that many app stores disallow from being included.

Even with app store restrictions, mobile sex education games do exist. Two mobile games that focus on sex education are HappyPlayTime, Show Me Yours, and SexPositive. Each game is unique, despite the similar topic.

HappyPlayTime is a game for iOS that aims to destigmatize female masturbation. Players must play with Happy, a cartoonish vulva, and make her orgasm. The game includes a love meter that fills up when Happy is correctly touched and decreases when she is poked or ignored for too long. In addition, the game includes lessons about the vulva and a compendium of moves

that the player can reference. Sadly, the game was removed from the app store because of the stigma regarding female masturbation.

Show Me Yours is a game for Android and iOS by Trojan that is based on Cards Against Humanity, a popular card game. The game requires at least 3 people to play and allows for up to 8 players. In Show Me Yours, players submit answers to fill-in-the-blank questions. Each turn, one player judges everyone's responses. Not all questions and answers in the game are overtly sexual, but many are innuendos. The game also has a section that allows players to buy condoms and lubrication directly from Trojan.

SexPositive is a slot machine game for Android and iOS that allows players to learn about risks associated with certain body parts touching other body parts. The game is very simple and does not contain rules. There are no other mechanics in the game except for the slot machine-style randomization. Each time the player presses "Spin Again", the game combines a body part with either another body part or a sex toy (e.g. "When my penis touches a finger"). Once a combination has been made, the game offers S.T.I. risks, safer sex practices, and advice.

American mobile gamers

My project is focused on people who have been affected by religions similar to Christianity and are interested in learning about sex. My main target group is people between the ages of fourteen and twenty-five in the United States of America who were raised in a Christian household. I believe America's relationship with sex is quite different and more nuanced than other countries'; our media is inundated with sex, yet we are taught to avoid it as children and young adults.

In order to reach my target audience, the game will be released for Android and iOS, the two largest smartphone operating systems. According to a 2013 study by the Nielsen Company, almost 80% of young adults own a smartphone. Since many young people share computers with other family members, releasing the game for smartphones increases the chance that people will be able to play the game with less possibility of punishment.

46% of young religious people in America think their religion is neutral or negative towards sex (Yip, Keenan, and Page 12). That is a massive number of people who are being negatively influenced. This project can help to reverse the damage.

Mobile games young people play

Curriculum

Introduction

The curriculum created for SenseU was formulated with the aim to help people learn about sex in a judgment-free way.

Research

Research strategy

A questionnaire with qualitative and quantitative questions will surface helpful answers about the religiosity of Americans across different age groups as well as help determine a sentiment regarding Americans' bodies and sex. Additionally, the general quality of American sex education can be assessed from the perspective of those who directly experienced it.

Methods of data collection

Empirical research

In order to assess the quality of sex education in the United States and determine areas in which American sex education can be improved, empirical research must be conducted.

The questionnaire will ask questions such as...

American sex education curricula

In addition to empirical research, a review of American sex education curricula will be conducted.

Data analysis framework

Research results

Sex as taboo in the United States

Quality of sex education in the United States

Despite the variety of sex education in the United States, many people still relied on the internet to learn about sex.

Study of American sex education curricula

Sex education in the United States is heavily focused on pregnancy prevention and STI prevention. Many curricula underscore the idea that young people should not have sex.

Resulting curriculum

Based on existing sex education curricula and research, a modified curriculum was created. The resulting curriculum aims to cover the most important parts of sex education. The lessons will teach players about sex in a neutral way that neither encourages or discourages sexual activity.

Benefits of sex

Sex has many health benefits; self-understanding is an important part of good sex.

The sensual mind

The sensual body

Kinds of sex

Consensual sex

Society

Prototype

Before the first prototype was created, sketches and wireframes were generated to create an understanding of the amount of content that would need to be designed. The idea was quite

complicated in that players would embody a traveler in a fantasy world whose goal was to assist various townspeople with interpersonal issues.

The original prototype, created in the Spring of 2015, consisted of a home screen, a personality quiz, a grading system, and two blank screens that were placeholders for a world map and town map. The quiz consisted of the following multiple-choice questions related to self-esteem, sensuality, and communication:

- What is your first name/nickname?
- Do you like the way your body looks?
- Would you accept compliments about your appearance from your friends?
- Do you compare yourself to other people?
- Would you ever wear revealing clothing outside?
- Do you think of sex and masturbation as gross and/or sinful?
- How do you think having sex would affect your health?
- If you liked someone, what would you do?
- Do you talk with your immediate family or friends about sex?
- If your partner wanted to have sex and you didn't feel like it, what would you do?
- How did answering these questions make you feel?

Answers to the questions above could either be positive, neutral, or negative. Once the quiz was completed, the game would grade the player's confidence level by adding up the number of positive, neutral, and negative answers. Possible results were "Doubtful", "Timid", "Unsure", "Knowledgeable", and "Confident".

The "doubtful" grade was created for people who were likely very unconfident. People who received this grade were likely to be poor communicators who feel uncomfortable talking about sex. Additionally, they were more likely to believe in a religion that had a negative view of sex.

The "timid" result was given to players who were slightly unconfident and awkward communicators.

Players with the "unsure" grade likely felt neither very positive nor negative about their bodies and sex. They were likely to be acceptable communicators, but not great.

The “knowledgeable” grade was created for people who were likely very unconfident.

Finally, the “confident” grade was received by people who selected the positive option for every question. People who received this grade were likely to be confident communicators with a positive view of sex. Ideally, all players would eventually improve and reach this grade over time.

The aesthetic of the initial version of the game was centered around bright colors, patterns, and round shapes. This palette was chosen with the intention to make players feel less uncomfortable about playing a game with sex as the focal subject.

The aim of the prototype was to allow players to have conversations with multiple people at once to help resolve town issues. However, this idea was too complicated to implement in the first version of the game due to time constraints and the lack of a detailed story. Work on the prototype was placed on hold until the story could be elaborated upon.

Alpha

Change in order and number of levels

Number of characters

Narrative-focused, less mechanics-focused.

College focus rather than traveller.

The quiz

Aesthetic

Technology

The first prototype was coded in HTML and JavaScript. Instead of plain JavaScript, Phaser was used. Phaser is a JavaScript game engine, or framework used to make games.

The second interactive prototype was created using Omnigraffle, a mind-mapping and wireframing software. Once the wireframes were created, they were exported to PNGs and imported into an app called InVision. Using InVision, the wireframes were linked and an interactive prototype was generated.

After confirming the redesign by generating and iterating upon the second prototype, the Alpha version was coded using Phaser.

According to a 2013 study by the Nielsen Company, almost 80% of young adults own a smartphone. In order to directly reach young adults, Intel XDK was used to package the game for mobile phones.

Narrative

Environment

The story of SenseU takes place in an imaginary town off the northwest coast of Washington with a population of about 5,500. The town consists of a rural area, a small downtown area with several shops and large mall, as well as an undergraduate college with a 30-acre campus. The town's median age is 31.

The college is a private, secular, national-level undergraduate school called the University of Sustainable Engineering, Natural Science, and Education. The school is colloquially known as "SENSE U". A large portion of the town's population consists of SENSE U students. There 180 members of staff: 44 members of the staff are teachers, and the remaining 136 members of staff focus on topics including admissions, financial aid, library, cooking, and cleaning. The school consists of 1,900 undergraduate students, including 600 freshmen, 500 sophomores, 450 juniors, and 350 seniors.

The campus has 10 educational buildings and 5 dorm buildings. All buildings in total take up 10 acres. Other amenities include 2 parking lots, 1 football field, 3 baseball/soccer fields, 7 tennis courts, and 2 parks. The remaining acreage contains general recreational areas and green spaces.

The ten educational buildings include a lecture hall, one building for each field of study (Sustainable Engineering, Natural Science, and Education), a library, a research center, a common building for student unions and clubs, a gymnasium, a dining hall, and a medical facility. Dorms are separated by student year.

According to recent studies, SENSE U is the 15th-most prestigious undergraduate school in the USA. Approximately 10,000 people apply to attend the school each year. The acceptance

rate is quite low at 600 freshmen per year for a total of approximately 6%. SENSE U also allows up to 50 sophomores and juniors to transfer to the school each year.

Tuition at SENSE U costs approximately \$35,000 per year. Including room and board, the tuition goes up to \$48,000. Students attending SENSE U can choose to major in Psychology, Biology, Physics, Mechanical Engineering, Civil Engineering, Computer Science, Art Education, Science Education, or Mathematics Education. Because of the rigorous courses, approximately 100 students leave within their first year, 50 students leave in their second year, and 100 more students leave within their third year. Approximately 350 students out of a 600-person class will graduate from SENSE U.

Resident assistants

The primary character in the game is a college sophomore at SENSE U. They are originally from a city outside Washington. This character, who inherits the player's name and personality, has applied to become a resident assistant (often called "RA") due to their inability to afford school housing. After a rigorous process including many interviews, their application was accepted. The story begins one week before school when the character arrives for school orientation.

Research via surveys, interviews, and reading was conducted to understand the role of resident assistants in universities. 50 people responded to a survey regarding the process of becoming a resident assistant in addition to the conflicts faced during their terms in that role. Two people were interviewed about their experiences in person. Countless reading was conducted via social media sites and ...

Resident assistants are a crucial part of the college dorm experience. They are not only students, but also figures of authority who must watch over their peers and cultivate a sense of community. During orientation, they are trained to be able to handle issues ranging from fire safety to sexual assault. Resident assistants often help students handle problems related to roommate conflicts, violation of alcohol guidelines, and drug possession.

Before becoming a resident assistant, the player character used grants and need-based scholarships to pay for school. Their work as a resident assistant enabled them to continue attending SENSE U. Many resident advisors cannot afford room & board fees [x]. The primary character lives in room 304 of Willoughby House, a freshman & sophomore dorm building.

Like many resident assistants, the game's primary character has a mentor who helps ease the transition into the role. Efe Turay is a sophomore at SENSE U who began working as a resident assistant over the summer before the new semester. In the game, she offers support to the main character.

Closing paragraph...

Non-player characters in launch edition

In the game, players communicate with their dorm residents via text message to help resolve friendship, romantic relationship, and roommate conflicts. Each resident character in SenseU was created to cover specific topics related to sex education. The characters were designed using an extensive spreadsheet in which qualities such as age, gender, sexuality, religion, and ethnicity were inputted. This method enabled a diverse array of characters to be created.

Efe Turay

Efe Turay is the player's mentor and a bisexual second-generation Nigerian sophomore. She was born in New York City and is studying Mathematics Education. She works as an RA to pay for remaining tuition and education costs after scholarships have been processed. In addition to her study, she learns Japanese and attends the Japanese culture club.

Gaiya Brose

Gaiya Brose is a straight white American freshman from Montana. Her parents are strict Christians. She strongly believes in abstinence until marriage. Gaiya is studying Biology and also actively participates in the Japanese culture club.

Jade Sepulveda

Jade Sepulveda is a gay second-generation Bolivian transwoman from Virginia. She is an atheist and a freshman at SENSE U. Her family doesn't know about her religion or sexuality. In addition to studying Computer Science, Jade sings for a band and organizes a monthly feminist roundtable.

Louis Hayford

Louis Hayford is a gay Trinidadian sophomore. He moved to the United States with his family in 1996. His family doesn't know about his religion or sexuality. In addition to studying Mechanical Engineering, Louis is also in a jazz band.

Future non-player characters

Ahanu "Han"

Ahanu "Han" is a straight American freshman of Algonquian descent. Han's family lives in Massachusetts. He plans to become an active member of a fraternity. In addition to his Civil Engineering studies, he plans to continue pursuing sports after winning a scholarship for playing football.

Noah Matsuoka

Noah Matsuoka is a freshman at SENSEU. He is also a bisexual, third-generation Japanese-American student from California. His family isn't particularly religious, but they are quite well-off. In addition to his Science Education studies, Noah participates in a gaming club.

Griffin Cooper

Griffin Cooper is a pansexual, Black-American, genderqueer freshman from Georgia. They won a business undergraduate scholarship to attend school. In addition to studying Mechanical Engineering, they participate in the LGBTQ club and host dance parties.

Javier Barraza

Javier Barraza is a gay freshman studying Computer Science. He is a third-generation Dominican transman from the New York City. He is an avid yoga practitioner and organized LGBTQ events at his high school. He hopes to find less discrimination in college and plans to continue participating in LGBTQ events.

Rishika Pradhan

Rishika Pradhan is a straight sophomore from India who majors in Biology. Her family sent her to school in America in order for her to get "the best education". She has previously studied in Britain, Germany, and Australia. Her family prepared enough money to send her to international

schools, as they own a manufacturing company. She aims to work in the United States or London once she graduates.

Nolann Rheem

Nolann Rheem is a straight, bi-racial, Black-identified sophomore from a small town in Washington. He was the constant focus of racial insults as a child and feels strongly about racial equality. He funnels events from his past into his artistic work. His parents completely fund his education. He is unsure of his future, but he wants to continue to be artistic. Nollann is studying Art Education.

Story & conflicts

The following diagram shows character relationships as well as the conflicts they will experience. After diagramming the characters, in-depth conflict descriptions were created for each scene in the game.

Scene 0: Introduction

The semester is about to begin and you move in.

Scene 1: Health & Human Development

Jade failed to find anyone to hook up with at a welcome party and is frustrated. She needs help figuring out where to go to find people.

Louis and Noah hooked up after the welcome party. Noah disappeared afterward. Louis and isn't sure how to deal with the situation.

Gaiya met Han at a party and found him attractive. She is starting to question her choice to wait until marriage.

Scene 2: Neuropsychology of Behavior

Nolann is feeling frustrated about both school and his appearance. He is finding it difficult to cope.

Gaiya needs advice regarding ways to deal with sexual thoughts.

Griffin wants to come out about their genderqueer identity.

Noah wants to come out about being bisexual but is afraid of being judged.

Scene 3: Human Genetics & Biology

Gaiya is excited because she and Han made out at a party. It got a little awkward because she isn't the best kisser. However, he asked her on a date and she said yes. She needs advice regarding ways to get better at kissing and how to move forward with their relationship.

Rishika is unsure of how to make Nolann feel comfortable with his body. They were going to have sex after meeting after a party, but he backed out because he thought she wouldn't like the way he looked naked. She wants to understand ways to make him feel attractive that involve the chest, back, ears, and neck.

Jade met Griffin at a party and they hit it off instantly. Some close dancing and touching ensued before she found out that Griffin doesn't identify as female. She's not sure what that means and needs help.

Javier and Louis are interested in each other after briefly meeting at a party. They plan to go on a date soon, and he knows that will probably lead to sex. Javier is nervous about being naked in front of Louis and wants advice.

Han thinks he might have a minor lower-body STI after hooking up with someone a few weeks ago. He needs help dealing with it before things get serious with Gaiya.

Scene 4: Writing Seminar: Love and Trouble

Gaiya was touching herself when her roommate Rishika came in. She feels ashamed.

Noah and Efe started seeing each other after running into each other at the Japanese culture club. He wants advice about safe oral sex, especially after hearing about Han's STI.

Louis is about to have his first experience with anal sex and is nervous.

Rishika needs advice about vaginal sex to prepare for her date with Nolann.

Griffin needs advice regarding sexual activities they can do with Jade.

Scene 5: Language and Law

Rishika wants to ask Nolann to have sex with her but is unsure if he'll say yes. She needs encouragement.

Gaiya and Han slept together. She wonders if she did the right thing.

Nolann wasn't in the mood to have sex. He wonders if he should've said yes just to please Rishika.

Rishika asked Nolann to have sex with her. He said no. She's unsure if she should ever ask a guy for sex again.

Efe is unsure if she consented to sex with Noah at a party. She was very drunk.

Louis is hurting after a sexual encounter with Javier turned violent.

Noah is unsure if Efe consented to sex with him at a party. He was drunk and assumed she'd said yes.

Scene 6: Anthropology

Rishika is angry because Gaiya keeps sexiling her without advance warning.

Griffin had a negative interaction with Gaiya and wants to make her understand what identifying as genderqueer means.

Jade decides to break up with Griffin when she can't reconcile the fact that Griffin is sexually attracted to other people on campus. She's not ready for a polyamorous relationship.

Gaiya decides to reflect on her beliefs after her experiences with Han and a discussion with Griffin about gender.

Nolann is angry because Rishika made an assumption about his sexual proclivity. She assumed he'd want to have sex because he's Black, but he's not interested in sex at all. He wants to break up with her and needs help figuring out how to communicate.

Javier is furious after Jade breaks up with Griffin. He thinks it's partially because Griffin doesn't identify as a woman. Javier thinks Jade should know better than anyone that gender isn't set in stone.

Louis finds out Noah is bisexual. He doesn't believe Noah since they slept together.

Scene 7: Ending

The semester ends.

Timeline of events

A timeline of these events shows the story arc from start to finish in terms of stress on characters in the game.

Conclusion

According to Darrel Ray in *Sex and God: How Religion Distorts Sexuality*, “People who learn sex without guilt make better decisions, talk and negotiate more openly with their partners and respect the sexual preferences and desires of others. They enjoy their own bodies and are less jealous, possessive and judgmental” (Ray 22). People should not be afraid to have sex, but rather equipped with correct information.

SenseU will help people form a more positive relationship with sex. In the opinion of many, abstinence-until-marriage education does not work; it does American society a disservice by preventing people from learning about sex during one of the most hormonally unstable periods of their lives. Teenagers and adults alike need to be informed about sex in order to prevent unplanned pregnancies. This project will help people make better decisions about sex.

Before the agricultural revolution, sex was a group activity that centered around many people experiencing physical release (Ryan, Jetha 14). The authors of *Sex at Dawn: How We Mate, Why We Stray, and What It Means for Modern Relationships* state that Bonobos, one of our closest genetic relatives, still emulate this behavior and “use eroticism for pleasure, for solidifying friendship, and for cementing a deal” (Ryan, Jetha 85). According to Planned Parenthood, sex has many health benefits including lower risk of mortality, reduced stress, enhanced fertility, and improved sleep (Whipple, Knowles, and Davis 2). People should not stop having sex, but rather do so in a safe and informed manner.