



Mobile technology to Improve Sexual & Reproductive Health and Rights in India

Youth Champions Initiative Case Study



Love Matters' Ask Auntyji Anything forum allows users to consult their resident sexual expert.

ABOUT YOUTH CHAMPIONS INITIATIVE

Youth Champions Initiative invests in powerful young leaders ages 18-30 who are leading the sexual and reproductive health and rights movement in Ethiopia, India, Pakistan and the United States. In collaboration with the Packard Foundation, this externally validated model enables young leaders to create large-scale change through leadership development, technology, innovation, and advocacy.

ABOUT RISE UP

Rise Up advances health, education and equity for girls, youth, and women everywhere. Since 2009, Rise Up's powerful network of over 500 leaders has directly impacted 7 million girls, youth, and women in addition to advocating for the passage and implementation of over 100 laws and policies impacting 115 million people globally. We invest in visionary leaders, local organizations, and innovative solutions to achieve large scale change through leadership development, advocacy, funding, and storytelling. Rise Up unifies the power of **Let Girls Lead**, **Champions for Change** and the **Youth Champions Initiative** to create a better future for girls, youth, and women in Africa, Central America, South Asia and the United States.

Very few of India's 243 million adolescents have access to sexual education in school. In June 2014, former Indian health minister Harsh Vardhan called for a ban on **comprehensive sex education**, and 12 of 29 state governments have banned the Adolescent Education Programme, a sexuality education curriculum developed by the Indian Central Government in consultation with the National AIDS Control Organization and UNICEF.¹ According to a **study** by the Population Council, just 37% of young men and 45% of young women were aware that a woman can get pregnant on her first sexual encounter². Without traditional educational structures in place, many of the 300 million youth in India turn to the internet for information about sex and sexuality. While they often find pornography and misinformation, some searches may lead to a website called **Love Matters**.

Love Matters is a web platform that provides open, honest and youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) information to young people in five regions (India, Egypt, Kenya, Venezuela, and China) and five languages (English, Hindi, Arabic, Spanish, and Chinese). Love Matters uses a unique pleasure-positive focus to draw users to the site and reduce stigma around sex-related topics. Each of the other regional sites is also tailored to its local context.

LoveMatters' contains many sections including a comprehensive encyclopedia called "Sex A-Z" and a Q&A forum provides news, articles, social media platforms, tips, videos and more. As Love Matters Global Content Strategist Michelle Chakkalackal says, "We suspect that a percentage of people are looking at porn, in lieu of accurate sexual education."

1 Sood N, Suman P. (2008). Report to the United Nations Human Rights Council for the universal periodic review of the Republic of India on the lack of comprehensive sexuality education in India. Youth Coalition for Sexual and Reproductive Rights (YCSRR), Canada. Retrieved December 2016 from <http://sexualrightsinitiative.com/wp-content/uploads/India-UPR-1-YC.pdf>.

2 International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) and Population Council. (2010). Youth in India: Situation and Needs 2006-2007, Executive Summary. Mumbai IIPS. Retrieved December 2016 from http://www.popcouncil.org/uploads/pdfs/2010PGY_YouthInIndiaExecSumm.pdf



“I heard so much about the Silicon Valley and the innovations in the field of social good—I hoped that YCI would be eye-opening and expose me to new challenges and new ideas.”

YCI came at a crucial time for Gayatri and Love Matters because in reviewing their analytics, the team discovered that roughly 60-70% of their traffic came from users on mobile devices, particularly smartphones. YCI created an opportunity for Gayatri to think about how to engage these users in an innovative way by using WhatsApp, a free mobile instant messaging service.

GAYATRI PARAMESWARAN
Youth Champion, India

A user who happens upon the site from searching porn terms may then explore Love Matters’ resources on SRHR topics like safe sex and STI prevention, as well as advice about love and relationships. Michelle asserts that, “From a public health or SRHR perspective, we might be interested in preventing unintended pregnancy, but our audience is interested in how to have relationships or how to have fun and our pleasure pages can act as a gateway, drawing our audience to our site, and then from there they explore.”

To continue actively engaging with Love Matters’ users, Youth Champion, Gayatri Parameswaran, created a WhatsApp pilot project as an innovative way of sharing SRH information. Gayatri’s YCI project received over 1,000 responses for the 3-month WhatsApp pilot through a Facebook ad which linked to a short demographic survey. The first 256 people who completed a demographic survey and fit the selection criteria entered the WhatsApp broadcast service and received 45 WhatsApp messages from LoveMatters with SRHR information, as well as videos about different topics like ‘penis shapes and sizes’ and ‘can you tell if she’s a virgin?’ as well as images with tips and opinion polls.

Additionally, Gayatri and the LoveMatters team installed social sharing icons on the Love Matters website, so that users could share links over email, Facebook, Twitter, Google+ and WhatsApp. The social sharing icons allowed the team to track what content was being shared on which platform and how often. Much to the team’s initial surprise, email and WhatsApp were the most-used methods of sharing articles. According to Michelle, these platforms allowed users to share more personal information: “You wouldn’t necessarily post on Facebook, ‘I’m interested in gonorrhoea’... but you might share in more private settings, and WhatsApp and email offer a private setting.” The social media icons on the Love Matters India were so widely used that the organization has now incorporated them into all Love Matters platforms.

Users clearly valued the private setting that WhatsApp provided, and the reaction to the end of the WhatsApp pilot is indicative of its impact: “When we announced on the group that the pilot project was going to shut down,” Gayatri says, “we received a number of replies that said, ‘No, please don’t stop the service, you’re doing such a good job. What are we going to do without the service? You have to continue this work.’ And that, to me, was a measure of success.”

“Because we are online... we have access to people that normally don’t come to more traditional sex ed programs. Also, it’s on-demand, available whenever you want it,” says Michelle. Gayatri agrees that employing tech is a “matter of convenience, low cost, and reach.” WhatsApp is a free service, unlike text messaging, and the app makes it easy to share multimedia content. In the user satisfaction survey at the end of the WhatsApp broadcast group pilot, users confirmed that they found videos most useful, followed by images, and then text messages. Someone who receives texts every day may not be as inclined to read about SRHR information, but videos are more enticing and draw interest. Both the broadcast group and the social sharing icons provided new avenues to learn about SRHR and attracted new users to Love Matters’ website.

However, using technology as an education tool also has certain limitations, particularly with respect to access. According to the *Internet in India Report by Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI) and IMRB International*, 120 million active internet users are college students with 71% of all users being male.

अब लव मैटर्स व्हाट्स एप पर
हमारे व्हाट्स एप सर्विस में भाग लीजिये
प्यार, सेक्स और रिश्तों से जुड़े टिप्स
सोपे आपके व्हाट्स एप पर |

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lovematters.in

This recruitment ad reads: “Now Love Matters is available as a WhatsApp service. Please participate in this WhatsApp service. Love, Sex, & Relationship related tips on your WhatsApp.”

“In India, we’re seeing that there appear to be more men coming to the site than women. And our hypothesis around this is partially that men have more disposable income, access to technology, and free time, and no one is checking their phones,” says Michelle. The broadcast group was predominantly male, young, and urban: subscribers were 94% male, 95% were between the ages of 18-30, and 66% were from urban areas. Of this group, only 27% reported having had any kind of sex education.

While the overwhelmingly male subscribers denotes difficulty reaching women in India through technology, Gayatri notes that most family planning initiatives are targeted at women. To reach more women through platforms like LoveMatters, Gayatri suggests finding spaces where women can speak freely about love, sex and relationships because “Making resources available to them could trigger conversations and help break taboos around discussing these topics.” Using tech to engage mainstream men into discussions about family planning and SRHR information may serve as a complement to existing programs.

Although the broadcast group was meant to be one-directional, with Love Matters sending content to subscribers, users did write back with personal questions or requests for more information. Thirty subscribers attempted to call Love Matters over WhatsApp, though that functionality was never advertised as a feature of the broadcast group. In the user satisfaction survey, all respondents indicated a desire for one-on-one counseling through WhatsApp. Though Love Matters did not have the manpower for this much interactivity in the pilot, with additional resources WhatsApp can serve as a powerful tool for providing Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights information and advice.



Without YCI, Gayatri says, “I wouldn’t have been able to lead a project of this scale... I think that was one of YCI’s strengths, that it made it very clear that this is helping your leadership potential, and it starts with a small pilot.” From this pilot project, Gayatri learned how to manage an international project, working with the local team in India as well as the Love Matters main office in the Netherlands. Feedback from the user satisfaction survey revealed that not only was WhatsApp a novel and effective means of disseminating SRHR information, but it allowed for particularly engaging forms of multimedia outreach. Users rated animated videos the most useful resource. Gayatri has secured additional funding from YCI to produce more videos to capitalize on this new niche in comprehensive sexuality education. Two videos are currently in production, one about myths and facts regarding masturbation and the other about abortion.



Gayatri credits YCI with the decision to integrate mobile technology and innovation in Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights: “It helped me do things that I wouldn’t have had the opportunity to do in terms of innovation with the pilot... to push the boundaries of technology within a seed grant. The funding was limited, but the opportunities and the options were unlimited.”



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