ENGAGED EXCELLENCE

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Affective Engagement: Teaching Young Kenyans about Safe and Healthy Sex

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Abstract Research suggests that young people are arriving at sex education sites mostly through campaigns on social media and paid sites. Whilst not everyone is accessing porn, it is essential to find creative ways to engage with young people to strengthen and build on existing online sex education. In this study, a team of researchers, international project staff, musicians and multimedia artist worked effectively together on mobilising audiences based on research evidence on sex education for young Kenyans. The approach taken was innovative but it was also rooted in high-quality research evidence. This article focuses on two areas of learning from the programme – *how research can support a creative team to discuss sexuality in a radically open fashion* and *how to remain focused when working in multidisciplinary teams*.

Keywords: sex, affective engagement, online, Kenya, action research, education.

1 Introduction

Sex and relationships have a big impact on young people's lives. For most young people in the world, apart from pornography, getting information about sexual pleasure can be difficult. And it is even harder if you live in parts of the world where often the decision on who to date or marry, and how many children to have, is not your own. Academic research is inaccessible to most people who are not academics, whether young or old.

Online information on sexuality is successful because it is hard to get good information in real life. Research suggests that young people are arriving at sex education sites mostly through campaigns on social media and paid sites. As not all young people are using these sites, it is essential to find other ways to engage with them, and ensure that offline information strengthens and builds on the existing online sex education.

Figure 1 Shanty L and 20 More Days perform at the Love Matters concert in Kenya

Photographer Iris Honderdos. Reproduced by kind permission of Love Matters.

Online information sharing can result in individual and collective action when online and offline social networks are affectively and practically linked (Oosterhoff, Hoang and Quach 2014).

Our study 'Affective Engagement with Research Evidence about Young People's Sex Education in Kenya' (Oosterhoff *et al.* 2016) used 'affective engagement' as part of a multi-layered and multi-method interdisciplinary participatory action-research process on online sex education for young Kenyans. Affective engagement is a person-centred conceptual approach that focuses on the role of emotions and affection for understanding rational thoughts, preferences and choices. Affective engagement as theorised by Massumi (2002, 2008) can be helpful in understanding user preferences, or artistic and musical preferences and choices (van Oosten, Jochen and Valkenburg 2015). It is also a helpful concept to understand political and social choices and preferences, such as the rise of celebrity activism. When people lose faith in traditional leaders, institutions and authorities, it can create room for other types of leaders (Tsaliki, Frangonikolopoulos and Huliaris 2011). The post-election violence in Kenya in 2008, for example, opened up the way for celebrity runners to discuss peace (Wilson, Van Luijk and Boit 2015). People trusted them and felt a positive, emotional connection. Working with Massumi's theoretical concept of affective engagement, we reasoned that for research evidence to have an impact and inspire people to change we needed to create affective linkages and partnerships with people who can have a real say in how this evidence is presented, and have the freedom to take it to their audiences or use it to find new ones.

The project was jointly undertaken in a partnership between the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and Love Matters headquarters, Love Matters Kenya, a Dutch composer/music producer and a Dutch

multimedia artist specialising in community-based art production, the Kenyan record label Penya and the Sauti music academy in Nairobi.

Love Matters is an international organisation dedicated to online sex education for youth. It offers playful and thought-provoking articles, testimonials, blogs and advice columns. The social media sites host lively conversations, which are all tuned into regional culture. In this project, we wanted to explore the meaning and relevance of themes that emerged from analysis of online behaviour on the Love Matters platform, and offline research on gender roles and sexuality by young people. The intention was to better understand if and how online information on sexuality is relevant to young people in Kenya, a country that has recognised the existence of many problems with the sexual and reproductive health of young people but where sex education is still taboo. Love Matters was specifically interested in innovative creative approaches and methodologies that could mobilise young people, giving the other partners full creative freedom.

With the support of the 'creative team' comprising the Dutch composer/music producer and multimedia artist and a Kenyan music producer/director/teacher, 15 musicians studying at the Sauti Academy wrote songs based on the research analysis and uploaded recordings of them on YouTube. Online voting for the People's Choice resulted in the winners being signed by Penya and all the participants performing their songs in front of a live audience, an event which was recorded.

We found that the issues raised by young people in Kenya using online platforms such as social media sites, blogs and online discussions were also relevant to offline non-users. Interpersonal exchange between the young people directly involved in the study, the sexual health experts and the international creative team were key to stimulating critical reflection on meanings of sex and love, and creativity in the production of original songs during the project.

The young musicians involved said that they had learned how to communicate effectively about sexuality, expectations and affection. The participants also became aware of how to use their own experiences to connect with people, and most said they realised their responsibility and potential as artists to make progressive social change.

The process was joyful but not without challenges. This article is framed by the four pillars of the IDS 'engaged excellence' model: delivering high-quality research, co-constructing knowledge, mobilising impact-orientated evidence and building enduring partnerships. IDS prides itself on delivering research that is built on solid evidence. It is the authors' belief that affective engagement brings an additional emotive angle to this evidence which is important as it will increase its resonance amongst partners and beyond. This article focuses specifically on two interconnected areas of learning from the programme – *how research can support a creative team to discuss sexuality in a radically open fashion* and *how to remain focused when working in multidisciplinary teams.*

2 Delivering high-quality research

As a project team, we developed a broad basic concept for a collaboration that included working in partnership with a Dutch composer/music producer and a Dutch visual multimedia artist. Both had already worked with the lead researcher on many interdisciplinary community-driven art projects. We agreed to find Kenyan partners for a participatory musical action-research project with a launch and an installation. With this aim in mind, we developed a partnership with the Sauti Academy in Kenya. The brief was broad to begin with because we wanted to leave space for creativity and work through the details and the budget with Kenyan partners.

The project used affective engagement in our collaborative action research as a strategy to engage with different and new audiences on research findings about sexuality and relationships. Affective engagement is a person-centred conceptual approach that focuses on the role of emotions and affection for understanding rational thoughts, preferences and choices. It shapes attachment and belonging in environments where everything is in a state of flux (Barker 2014). Affective engagement is important to understand artistic preferences and choices (Massumi 2002). In order to accept messages through the arts, people need to feel affective engagement with the artist as a person, or his or her style, which is not something that can easily be predicted or imposed.

The creative team supported a group of music students from the Sauti Academy to explore the meaning and relevance of themes that emerged from analysis of online behaviour on the Love Matters sex education platform, and offline research on gender roles and sexuality by young people.

While the creative team was at first hesitant about talking explicitly about sex, they were reassured when presented with the research findings from the project's sexually explicit focus group discussions. The creative team also observed the Kenyan researcher and an international sexual health expert interact with the students, speaking in plain language about a wide range of sexuality-related topics.

The themes included:

- *Being responsible:* Both boys and girls talk about responsibility. Responsibility can be a duty, a burden, and a desirable characteristic. How does pleasure relate to sexual responsibility?

- *Expectations of sex and relationships:* Boys and girls have quite different expectations of sex and relationships but they are not talking openly with each other about these expectations. There is a lot of suspicion about each other's motives and many young people question whether their thoughts and desires are 'normal'.

Participation in the workshop was open to music students aged 18–30 years. The Sauti Academy was rigorous in its selection to ensure that everyone was over 18 and committed to the whole process. The

Figure 2 Love Matters workshop with students

Photographer Iris Honderdos. Reproduced by kind permission of Love Matters.

musicians wrote songs that were inspired by the research findings and which were then promoted through the Love Matters website and associated social media. Entries were critiqued by a panel of judges that included well-known experts from various disciplines (development, sexual health, music and the media). Meanwhile, global audiences voted via YouTube for a People's Choice Award. The winners were signed by Penya, a major Kenyan record label, and all the participants were invited to perform for a live audience. The concept and details of the performance were kept open, allowing the Kenyan participants to shape the event.

At the heart of the project was the recognition that culture informs norms, values and practices with regard to sex and pleasure. The arts can be an effective way to give voice to lesser heard groups and reach broader audiences. However, being able to reach people does not necessarily mean that they will adjust their behaviour in accordance with the explicit or implicit messages in art works.

Whilst the approach we took was innovative, it was also rooted in research evidence and local urban realities. This was a rigorous research project that relied on a thorough understanding of both the digital environment and the lived experiences of the Kenyan youth (Oosterhoff and Kageha Igonya 2015; Oosterhoff *et al.* 2016). Love Matters has done extensive research on how connected young people in Kenya are before its launch and continues to do so. Kenya has a high internet penetration rate of 68.4 per cent.[1] Kenyans can easily access social networking platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and WhatsApp. Eleven per cent of the population currently use Facebook – this percentage has steadily increased over the last few years, together with the spread of mobile phone use.[2] Facebook is an important gateway to the Love Matters website, with over 800,000 fans in 2015. YouTube is popular and widely watched on mobile phones – by both individuals and groups of friends. There is censorship, but it is mostly focused on

terrorism and more present in print media. However, sexually explicit material, for example a Durex commercial for condoms, was censored in the media. In January 2016, religious groups led a proposal to only allow talk about sex on the radio[3] between 10pm and 5am in order to protect children. Love Matters Africa has to be careful to avoid conflicts with some of these traditional offline gatekeepers, and with censorship by transnational corporate gatekeepers such as Facebook and Google. Love Matters' main target audience are urban, connected and educated young people. For this project, we wanted to explore linkages with a broader group of urban young people.

IDS researchers involved in the study conducted a review of the formal and informal literature on sexuality, gender, pop music, and sexual and reproductive health. Drawing from information-seeking behaviour collected by Love Matters as part of its standard quality control, we analysed online behaviour of 1,806,873 users in the period 1 June 2013– 31 August 2015. We looked at the page views, pages/session average, session duration and bounce rate.[4] To understand if and what the added benefit is of a pleasure-based approach, Love Matters uses a system to classify user behaviour in a session. Web searches under the headings of 'sex', 'love and relationships', and 'marriage' are classified as pleasure. Sessions are classified as sex education when users go to the site sections that are marked 'his body' or 'her body', 'disease prevention' (which has a subheading of 'safer sex'), 'sexually transmitted diseases' and 'family planning' (which has subheadings of 'birth control' and 'pregnancy').

We combined these standardised quantitative data with more qualitative data on questions and comments for Love Matters experts on social media. Based on our analysis of this information, we developed questions around gender, masculinity and sexuality for five focus group discussions with young men and women in Nairobi and Mombasa. The Kenyan interviewers all had extensive and very detailed experience of talking about sexuality with young Kenyans in urban settings, allowing them to answer many questions that emerged during these often very lively discussions.

We also tried to understand young people's music preferences. Penya and the Sauti Academy are based in Kenya and are well established but underfunded parts of the national music industry. The Dutch artists stayed in Kenya for one month and led online research on music, followed by individual interviews with people working in the commercial music industry in Kenya, and people with experience of collaborations with Kenyan musicians and the non-governmental organisation (NGO) sector. The findings were discussed with IDS and Love Matters and translated into focus group discussion questions about music and musicians which were conducted by Kenyan researchers.

Meanwhile, the researchers built on their experiences of working in the region by observing offline environments in slum and entertainment areas in Nairobi and Mombasa, and conducted informal exit interviews

with the students towards the end of the project to assess what they had learned that was valuable for them as musicians and artists as well as at a personal level. Throughout the whole research process, different people were leading on drafting and finalising texts, tools and plans that were shared.

3 Co-constructing knowledge

Although the researchers designed the action research and decided the themes of the competition, we allowed others to decide if, what and how they wanted to communicate and disseminate the results. The resulting songs were directly related to the research themes but treated and presented in fresh ways to audiences – one entry chose to target random smartphone owners on a bus and encourage them to listen and vote. These complementary, unique and different roles highlight the importance of partnership in the co-production of the concept, the process, the products and the knowledge in effective action research.

Working in multidisciplinary teams can result in collaborative and exciting outputs but they come as a result of a lot of brainstorming and discussion. In the Love Matters project, there was a great deal of mutual respect for roles. This developed as artists, researchers, donors and various project staff spent much time discussing and reaching a common understanding of the distinct responsibilities and roles. This understanding was then formalised into project documentation that included terms of reference and partner contracts. This level of clarity and documentation helped the project team to stay focused. Speaking on the planning for the event, international producer and sound artist Arno Peeters commented: 'First you have to let all ideas come to mind as if sky and budget are limitless and not hinder the flow of ideas by the sheer notion of failure'.

However, there was a financial reality and some difficult choices had to be made. A proposed joint preparatory visit by team members from Love Matters headquarters and IDS to explain in person to Love Matters staff in Kenya what this project was about – and how it could possibly benefit Kenya – had to be cut; instead, these discussions were done by email and Skype. We could only all meet at the very end of the project. Setting aside time to just 'be' with each other before, during and after the project creates a buffer for misunderstanding and frayed nerves. Although introductions are costly, interpersonal communications help to get to know your team, talk about how you like to work and be aware of people's sensitivities and personal workflows.

The collaboration process from the perspectives of the Dutch composer and artist has been documented in various interlinked blogs.[5] The purpose of the blogs from a researcher's perspective was to help external audiences understand the detailed work that goes into creating affective engagement with research. In the academic sector, several blogs focused on the use of action-research methods, including the IDS Sexuality, Poverty and Law website,[6] whilst on the IDS website[7] we documented

Figure 3 **Omari performing at the Love Matters concert**

Photographer Iris Honderdos. Reproduced by kind permission of Love Matters.

the wider contextual challenges. Processes and vocabularies that are familiar to NGOs and researchers such as TOR ('terms of reference'), FGDs ('focus group discussions') and the comms plan ('communication strategies') are not self-explanatory to outsiders, including the artists. Three months prior to the arrival of the Dutch artists in November, the project team had regular meetings (mostly on Skype) and exchanged over 146 emails with them alone to secure the details of the work plan and budget. Despite this, there was still a risk that the music students ultimately would not be interested in writing songs based on sex-related themes – after all, inspiration cannot be forced.

We could only plan so far. And it is worth reiterating the interpersonal and intercultural challenges of managing an internationally distributed workforce. Virtual communication can be misconstrued, especially when working to tight deadlines and when each player is juggling their own organisational demands, processes and expectations. For this reason, it was important that we created a work plan with clear milestones and key delivery dates.

We developed an idea for a contest during Skype calls between the Netherlands, the UK and Kenya and clarified some details. Together with the creative team we worked through the logistics of the performance, whilst leaving enough space to be responsive to the students' ideas. Inevitably, there were frustrations – Love Matters and IDS could not always respond to the suggestions or needs of the creative team immediately. This delay left some of the key players feeling that their investment or feedback was not valued; meanwhile, behind the scenes, emails were flying backwards and forwards as meetings were hurriedly scheduled to make decisions on things that could not be called at the individual level – hence the perceived time lapse. Added

to this was a local context with unfolding events over which none of us had control. For example, shortly before the planned live performance in Nairobi, a tour of three African countries by Pope Francis meant the centre of the city was locked down.[8] We quickly responded by changing the date and venue for the event, which required an extra risk assessment and lots of head scratching.

4 Mobilising evidence for impact

Throughout the project, members of IDS and Love Matters developed targeted communication plans. These included reaching out to relevant media organisations and sharing tailored outputs that included videos, blogs, news stories and press releases. Media mentions were monitored and page impressions were captured as a way of measuring reach and impact.

Within a period of two weeks, tens of thousands of people watched the videos and voted. Love Matters carefully tracked these statistics. One song alone attracted over 33,000 'likes' on Facebook. YouTube[9] views were in excess of 30,000 with 87 per cent of watching time taking place within Kenya. Meanwhile, the audience split was balanced with 56 per cent of the YouTube audience being male and 44 per cent female. Reaching an audience is not the same as having an impact on their behaviour, but the online comments did suggest that audiences had carefully listened to and received the messages contained in the songs, which were based on interpretations of the research findings.

The live performance was considered crucial to showcase the work of the participants to an invited audience of Love Matters users and partners, and the press. It also provided a way to highlight the 'guiding themes' and physically connect different elements of the project by drawing a line from where this project began with the focus groups, through to the online competition, and the live final. The scenes on stage provided a theatrical interpretation of the research themes and a richer context for the songs. Based on input by the students, the two Dutch artists developed a show with a storyline that connected the songs in an entertaining way. They developed a script[10] and a scenario involving pre-recorded sound and video, and devised a stage plan that used four locations of the venue. A student acting as master of ceremonies led the audience from stage to stage as the stories behind the songs unfolded. Special props were made, including the so-called 'Heart Art' that was decorated by the students and included short but powerful messages.[11]

The event planning notes clearly state, *NOTE: this is the ideal scenario. No doubt there will be a need to demonstrate resourcefulness and flexibility.* This principle was really put to the test. Whilst the event was well attended and enjoyable, it had its management challenges. Although the performances were scripted and planned as far as possible,[12] rehearsals could not take place and on the day itself the students arrived too

late to do a proper run through. As they had worked together before, the students had faith in each other's abilities and remained calm. Meanwhile, technical challenges saw the main sound engineer departing at midday with half the light and sound equipment and leaving a sole, unprepared technician to do all the work with the equipment that remained. Complaining to the company would not have been useful but, consequently, some corrections were needed during the show.

In spite of the challenges, the students performed well; however, the sound quality was suboptimal. The venue provided some extra loudspeakers, but unfortunately they were broken since they had been left in the rain at an earlier concert. While researchers, NGO members and the creative team took turns cringing at squeaky sounds, the audience evidently enjoyed the performance.

The event was widely covered in the international and national press. Written coverage included *The Guardian*[13] and One World Media,[14] and locally in *The Star*[15] and *Mpasho*.[16] Meanwhile, Ghetto Radio broadcast daily evening shout-outs in the four days prior to the event, with calls to social media action and voting.

Individual interviews with the student participants, the Dutch artists and various NGOs as part of the review of this project showed, not surprisingly, that different people had appreciated different things at different times. Musicians said that they had learned at the workshop how to communicate effectively about sexuality, expectations and affection.

> *This project helped me as an artist and as a person. As a person I learned how to communicate better with my own partner. I learned about the value of communication to work things through. I also learned that I can engage as an individual with my audience and use my own feelings to create songs about important topics in Kenya* (female student, pers. comm. 2016).

Participants also learned how to use their own experiences to connect with people, and most said they realised their responsibility and potential as artists to make progressive social change.

> *I wanted to be an artist of the people. But I did not know what that meant. I now know what it means to be engaged* (male student, pers. comm. 2016).

> *I am proud to have created a song about something bad that happened to me and see how much others appreciate this artistic and personal honesty* (female student, pers. comm. 2016).

The Love Matters project staff are used to communicating with their audience online. Given that the number of webpage views has constantly been rising, and mobile phone and internet usage in Kenya is very high, some staff initially felt no need to extend their audience offline. None of the students who participated – either in the focus groups or the performers – knew of Love Matters at the start of the project. The research showed that there were potential audiences that

Figure 4 Helena performing at the Love Matters concert

Photographer Iris Honderdos. Reproduced by kind permission of Love Matters.

were not being reached, and highlighted the value of interpersonal contact in helping individuals reflect on sexuality and relationships.

> *I was a bit sceptical about this approach. I am used to a more controlled digital environment. But I can now see how we can engage offline with a different audience that we are not reaching through an online entry point* (staff member, Love Matters, pers. comm. 2016).

5 Building enduring partnerships
The varied contributions from partners have been key to the success of this innovatory project. They have actively contributed and many have reported the importance of co-constructed knowledge and the desire to build enduring partnerships that go beyond the project funding.

Love Matters Kenya continues to work with the songwriting participants and has, for example, organised a concert as part of a campaign against sexual violence. They also continue to be interested in the work on sexuality. One of the winners plans to start an NGO for teenage rape victims and use her song as a first step towards this.

Working in partnership can strengthen understanding of needs and contexts and make a broader contribution to partner effectiveness and capabilities; however, it can be time-consuming, as roles often need to be sorted out on the spot. During this project, the IDS researcher found herself dealing with copyright issues and finding a guard and machete to clear the overgrown land for the performance space; Love Matters staff ended up rehearsing a play; and the Dutch artists became counsellors on a variety of life topics, as well as managers and bookkeepers. Artists and researchers all worked on research and

evaluation based on discussions on the management of the partnership and workload. This project was possible because all the team members had worked in different fields previously, some people had known each other for decades in different roles, and everyone was willing to use whatever skills were necessary to get things done and keep the relationships alive in the thick of it. In that sense, this project was *building upon our enduring partnerships*, not constructing them from scratch as part of a research project.

The principal outputs from this project include songs, videos, artwork, articles and written think pieces. Whilst the quality of the outputs has been high, often delays in the production process put pressure on the team: a producer falling ill, a winner who was elected as a student leader which took up more time than planned, car breakdowns and tour schedules that clashed with studio availability. It can be difficult to explain to outsiders or funders who are not used to these kinds of innovative but complicated co-productions why they take longer than, say, writing an article and why it makes no sense to plan everything in advance in a logical framework. This kind of innovation is therefore rather difficult in the current donor environment, with its emphasis on logical frameworks and often long and time-consuming procedures, to adjust planning to actual realities in larger and multi-year projects. The funding for this project was not nearly enough to cover the real time that any of the people involved have put into it. And, paradoxically, we think that it was probably only because we had such a small amount of funding – and thus less administrative burdens and requirements – that we were able to do this hybrid innovation. Technically speaking, this process can be expanded and scaled up in many countries with larger budgets. But that would require a partnership with a donor that can actually manage the unpredictability that comes with innovations, and invests in both partnerships and building trust where there is a larger innovation budget.

For the researchers, the competition confirmed the importance and the potential of linking online and offline social networks and social mobilisation in affective and effective engagement with participatory action research found in other settings (Hoang and Oosterhoff 2016). The creative modes of disseminating information provided new and enjoyable experiences that could be built on and replicated in other projects. For the researchers, this meant a developed understanding of creative processes and the need to trust and be flexible; for the creative team, lessons were learned about management processes and the need for some structure in order to deliver on time and to budget.

6 Conclusion
Overall, we found this multidisciplinary approach to be both successful and joyful. In this study researchers, international project staff, musicians, the composer/producer and multimedia artist worked effectively as a team on mobilising audiences based on research evidence.

Affective engagement with both the research topic and socially engaged art was important in inspiring musicians to produce compelling and original songs. This collaboration involved a conscious and positive radical shift of power away from the researchers. Whilst everyone had clearly defined expertise, the project was fluid in its approach and had a collegial atmosphere where members felt able to share responsibilities and discuss issues freely.

The research supported the creative team to discuss emotionally charged themes related to sexuality in an open fashion. While the creative team was at first hesitant to talk explicitly about sex, we could reassure them by pointing out that 5.5 million sessions online on the Love Matters website is an indication of people's interest in the topic, and by sharing findings from sexually explicit focus group discussions.

Meanwhile, the creative team learned more about the questions young people have about sexuality from watching the Kenyan researcher and the international sexual health expert interact with the students, speaking in plain language about a wide range of sexuality-related topics. This helped them to understand what topics are relevant to students and how they can be discussed.

The impact of the research is still growing through these partnerships as the winning musicians release their songs and video clips. Meanwhile, the partnerships and connections forged as a project team are enduring: signing off an email one day, one member thanked another and said, 'You are a darling. Love *does* matter, you see ;)'.

Note
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