SEX EDUCATION IN THE DIGITAL ERA

Editors **Pauline Oosterhoff, Catherine Müller and Kelly Shephard**

Enabling Online Safe Spaces: A Case Study of Love Matters Kenya

Maaike van Heijningen and Lindsay van Clief

Abstract For sexual health organisations, establishing a safe space to talk about sensitive topics is an important prerequisite for information exchange and open dialogue. With the popularity of social media and mobile phones, these safe spaces are moving online. This article examines one of these spaces, the Love Matters Kenya Facebook page, as an example of a sexual health organisation using social media to discuss sexuality with young people. We observed interactions on the Facebook page over a period of six weeks, and also led an online focus group discussion. The results showed that the key elements of a safe space are: good moderation; users' ability to create their own online personas; and a community atmosphere that enables trust and social relationships to grow.

Keywords: safe spaces, moderation, online communication, sex education, social media, Kenya, youth-centred, SRHR.

1 Introduction

Love Matters: *How was your 'first time'?*
Audrey: *I never had sex, I am still a virgin.*
Peter: *Come here, and I will break your virginity.*
Ben: *I wish I could get u.*
Andrew: *Looking for a virgin lady, well educated.*
Maria: *I would like to forget my first time, but I can't. I hate doing it, even with my hubby, I feel so dirty.*
Celia: *It seems like it was forced on u, but if you are married and feel dirty, you need counseling, so you can get over what happened. And start to enjoy every moment of it.*[1]

The above conversation is taken from the Love Matters Kenya Facebook group, where young Kenyans discuss love, sex and relationship issues. People exchange messages openly on the Facebook group's wall, but also send questions and concerns privately through the Facebook Messenger instant messaging app. Some, like Maria, a 35-year-old Kenyan woman, publicly share their personal concerns. Others, like 20-year-old Audrey, share experiences or confessions: in this case, that she is still a virgin. Unlike Maria, who received a sympathetic

reply to her comment and advice, Audrey had to deal with sexually explicit comments. While we cannot make any assumptions regarding how Audrey may have felt about this, it illustrates how online spaces can be both 'safe' enough to share very personal experiences and at the same time be very risky.

This article illustrates the key elements of an online safe space in the context of social media. It examines the lived experiences of young Kenyans in online spaces as they discuss sensitive topics on Facebook. It can be risky to share personal views on social networking sites generally, as these spaces are not always as safe as they appear. This article explores the opportunities and challenges of creating an online safe space for young people to talk freely about sexuality. In addition, it discusses the challenges for sexual health organisations in creating safe spaces, and suggestions about how such organisations can use them to improve online learning.

Social media has become an integral part of everyday life for young people throughout the world. Kenya has a high internet penetration rate of 68.4 per cent,[2] with 11 per cent of the population using Facebook, a percentage that has been steadily increasing over the past five years with the spread of mobile phone use.[3] Some sexual health organisations, like Love Matters, make use of this widespread adoption to provide young Kenyans with a safe online environment to learn and share information on sexuality, love and relationships. Love Matters Kenya is part of the global Love Matters project, which is active in several countries: India, China, Mexico, Venezuela, Egypt and Kenya. Each region uses several new media platforms to engage its audience, including a website, email, Facebook page, and Twitter. For Kenyan users, Facebook is an important gateway to the Love Matters website. With over 800,000 fans in 2015, it is a place to have conversations with peers and the organisation itself.

Sexuality is regulated by social norms that limit self-expression for young adults everywhere in the world, but these norms are particularly rigid in Kenya. It is unusual to discuss sexual matters in public, and silence is the norm for Kenyan families (Mbugua 2007). This can create barriers that prevent experimentation, which is an important period in adolescent development (Gupta 2000). Social media is thought to lower these barriers and help young adults talk more freely. Freedom enables conversations about sensitive topics, as it provides a space to experiment with their sexuality and sexual values; however, it can also create space for bullying and online harassment (McKenna, Green and Smith 2001). It is therefore important to examine the way Love Matters Kenya facilitates an online safe space on Facebook for its audience members to renegotiate sex and relationship taboos.

Social media is increasingly used as a tool for engaging people about sex and relationships. There are several reasons for this development: social media makes the information easily accessible; there are a lot of

different sources to choose from; there is less social stigma attached to obtaining information through semi-anonymous communication; and people can discuss things safely with peers as well as experts (Baelden, van Audenhove and Vergnani 2012; Ralph *et al.* 2001).[4] Digital interactivity and online peer-to-peer information sharing are valuable benefits of using social media for sex education. With this participatory approach, the goal is to create a social learning environment where success depends on establishing online interpersonal communication, in the hope that this communication will continue in the offline world and spark off conversations among families and peer groups (Baelden *et al.* 2012). Young people are not only consuming information passively, but also reflecting on it critically.

Although social media can be an effective way to engage young people, the online world can also be a hostile place where people – overwhelmingly women – are bullied, controlled and silenced (Pearce and Vital 2015; Katzer, Fetchenhauer and Belschak 2009). For example, Katzer *et al.* (2009) observed that verbal and psychological bullying in online spaces is a common practice, and that various hostile behaviours are practised online, including blackmailing, spreading rumours, and systematic exclusion of others. Threats of bullying and stigma also affect peer-to-peer sharing on social media (Evers *et al.* 2013), so it is important to research how sexual health organisations can foster a safe online space that minimises the effects of these negative behaviours. The creation of free, safe spaces is an essential aspect of optimising online learning.

So what is a safe space and how do organisations or people create one? Gender studies often define safe spaces as sites that are free from harassment and violence, where 'one can speak and act freely, form collective strength, and generate strategies for resistance' (Kenney 2001: 24). Safe spaces are 'any environment in which individuals feel free and able to communicate and express ideas without fear of retribution, intimidation, marginalization or silencing' (Brown 2011: 7). Both definitions stress the ability to speak freely; they are spaces for self-expression. In general, this involves monitoring who can join the group and keeping track of discussions, but in some online spaces – such as a Facebook page – this is impossible. It is an open space, and as such the administrators cannot make it completely 'safe'.

A distinction can be made between safe spaces that are 'separative' and those that are 'inclusive' (Rosenfeld and Noterman 2014). A separative safe space is a space where people who share similarities close themselves off from mainstream society and norms, not allowing others in (*ibid.*). A problem with separative safe spaces is that they are depoliticising; a complete separation also means losing a voice and influence in the dominant public sphere. For Love Matters, completely closing the group would go against its goals to create an online space where people from different backgrounds can learn from each other's differences and openly discuss love and relationship issues.

Inclusive safe spaces, on the other hand, are understood as an egalitarian ideal. In various theories of education (Brown 2011) the classroom is a space where every student, even those with marginalised identities, can develop and voice their opinions. This kind of safe space is more in tune with what Love Matters is trying to create online. Nevertheless, these inclusive safe spaces are arguably as problematic as separative safe spaces; by focusing solely on safety they risk becoming conformist, which undermines real dialogue and debate (*ibid.*; Rosenfeld and Noterman 2014). With lots of diverse perspectives it is often difficult to maintain respectful communication and reflect critically on each other's opinions. It is inevitable that power differences emerge in the group, as not everyone can make themselves heard (Rosenfeld and Noterman 2014). Thus, the space becomes risky for some members of the group, who may not feel completely free to express themselves.

There are also specific aspects of online safe spaces on Facebook that differ from the offline context. First, it is not easy to control who can participate in an online safe space on Facebook. This has its advantages and disadvantages. One advantage of the online environment is that it enables individuals to observe and learn from the group without the other members knowing that they are present (Crawford 2009). Listening while being silent is a valid strategy for young adults to mitigate the risk of voicing their opinions online (Pearce and Vital 2015). A disadvantage, however, is that you never know who your audience is, because you never know who is listening in. Offline communication is safer, in some circumstances, because you know who is present and your message is not visible to a large network. Second, different social media platforms have different design functions that influence how people communicate with each other; these influence interactions and the way people build online relationships and trust. For example, on Facebook people can 'like' comments on the Facebook wall. The more 'likes' a comment receives, the higher it is displayed in the comment thread, making it more visible.

While we acknowledge that online spaces are inherently complex and paradoxical, we must also remember that they are emerging spaces (Rosenfeld and Noterman 2014). Safe spaces, both inclusive and separative, are necessary when people feel they have no voice in society or safe place where they can share their experiences. They are an important and useful means of minimising the risk that voices are not heard.

Love Matters offers an opportunity to observe conversations online and to directly interact with audience members. As researchers we 'listened' to conversations, but also connected and talked to people directly through a private Facebook group that we set up. Based on these observations, we created a theoretical framework as an initial understanding of how people communicate on Love Matters social media platforms. This formed the basis for the topics discussed in an online focus group consisting of audience members from the Facebook page. This method of online ethnography (Kozinets 2009) enabled

us to collect in-depth data about how audience members of Love Matters Kenya use the Facebook page as an online safe space. Instead of focusing on statistical data, these methods deal with how and why people considered it to be 'safe' (Postill and Pink 2012).

2 Methods

This study was conducted as a partnership between a master's student at Utrecht University, Netherlands, and the Love Matters team. Various Love Matters members gave their input to shape the research and allowed access to all communication platforms. The researchers had relative autonomy to choose the research scope and direction. Through the partnership with the team, it was also possible to turn to other team members who were part of the online interaction to 'validate, dispute or expand upon the interpretations' (Kozinets 2009: 75).

We collected observation data during a six-week period in March–April 2015. During this time, we listened to conversations and observed naturally occurring behaviour online. We analysed the data using open and axial coding, then modified the approach to a more participatory one, establishing a separate Facebook group where we could ask participants questions about their experience of the main Love Matters page (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey 2011). We collected this 'co-created' data during a one-week online discussion group in October 2015.

In traditional ethnographies the standard fieldwork method is participant observation. This also applies to online ethnography, and through participant observation a researcher can collect data that are 'co-created with culture members through personal and communal interaction' (Kozinets 2009: 98). Only through this method can we reach a culturally embedded understanding. However, because the focus of the study was a community that discusses sensitive subjects online, by doing covert observation at the beginning of the fieldwork, it provided an opportunity to understand various online behaviours.

Online fieldwork has challenged the traditional understanding of ethnography. With classic fieldwork, an ethnographer can remain immersed in a culture or specific field site for extended periods of time. With online fieldwork, however, what it means to be physically immersed has changed (Hine 2000). Because we did not travel to Kenya, we were unable to have any face-to-face interaction with the people we encountered online. Hine (*ibid.*) would call the study incomplete, but as Boellstorff (2008) argues, researchers can study online sociability and virtual worlds on their own terms. Every ethnography, both online and offline, involves some degree of partiality, because doing ethnography is always 'socially constructed and contextually determined' (Kozinets 2009: 62).

For the participatory approach, as mentioned above, we created a focus group on the Facebook platform. The Love Matters Kenya Facebook group is an active community where members are used to participating

in discussions about numerous topics related to sex and relationships. It was therefore quite easy to find enthusiastic volunteers to participate in the focus group, and group discussion was an effective way to learn more about their views, beliefs, and experiences. Since we had already analysed and collected observations on Love Matters audience interactions, we used the focus group to clarify, extend or challenge these data. In addition, it is important to mention that the researchers' participation in the focus group influenced the discussion. In comparison to the Love Matters Facebook page, the power dynamics shifted in the focus group. Although we were still in the role of expert and researcher, guiding the discussion, participants now had the option of introducing their own topics of interest. During the discussion week respondents would, for example, post questions they had about why women or men cheat on their partners.

For this research, we used purposive sampling to recruit the respondents for the group (Hennink *et al.* 2011), and selected the respondents based on gender, age, country and engagement levels with Love Matters. The process of finding Facebook respondents lasted just over a month, and in the end we recruited 33 people: 19 men and 14 women. The respondents were all from urban areas, mostly the capital Nairobi and coastal city Mombasa. This is not surprising; living in an urban area increases the likelihood of having access to an internet connection. During this time we also engaged in private conversations with some of the respondents. Some of the stories they shared in these conversations are also discussed in the findings.

3.1 Discussing sexuality in Kenya: anonymity and friendship
Before examining the way people interact online, it is important to understand how young Kenyans feel about open discussions of sexuality in an offline context. All respondents agreed that it could be difficult to discuss sexuality in their culture. One male respondent stated: 'For women it's a shame to talk about it'. No one clearly addressed specific issues that men face when discussing sexuality, focusing instead on women, but two male respondents stated that talking about sex is difficult for everyone. A female respondent shared: 'It's a taboo; women are fined and punished if they dare share such topics. Women who do talk about it are considered to be prostitutes'. Another woman added:

> *Many communities share belief that women cannot talk about sex as then they are unfaithful. There is also poor introduction about sex; many of us grew up knowing that sex was an evil act hence you can't talk about it. And the first encounter very few people share how they felt about it, they prefer to remain silent* (female respondent #1).

By using words such as 'punished' and 'shame', they confirmed that Kenya is a society that avoids any verbalisation of sexuality; this is something that affects both men and women.

Online interaction is thought to lower barriers that prevent people from discussing sexuality openly, and anonymity is often cited as an important

factor in creating an online safe space for self-expression. When people feel anonymous, they find it easier to share more personal information online (Ralph *et al.* 2011). Anonymity, however, provides a freedom that can also encourage participants to post offensive comments (Reader 2012). This in turn can make others feels less 'safe'. But in the context of social media, where anonymous communication is quickly becoming a thing of the past, the dynamic shifts. Facebook in particular has been successful in linking online profiles to real-world identities (Boyd 2012). Given this complexity, it was important to explore what role anonymity plays and how it is understood in enabling an online safe space for respondents.

Respondents in the Facebook group reported that they valued the ability to stay anonymous. They had different understandings of what this actually meant, however, because many were using profiles that revealed their real-world names and pictures. But anonymity is not always understood as being completely unidentifiable; for some group members, the physical distance of being online – whether or not they were using their real name to comment – was a form of anonymity in itself. Most respondents felt less secure about speaking openly in offline spaces than they did online, although one female respondent was very vocal about the confidence she felt in speaking out, whatever the situation. The majority, however, felt more comfortable in an online environment simply because they could write things down rather than speaking to someone directly. Online communication is not face to face and therefore feels less confrontational, whether anonymous or not. Complete anonymity for our respondents was therefore a relatively unimportant factor in creating an online safe space; rather, it was the physical distance and asynchronous communication that provided a sense of safety. In addition, the ability to choose when to be online and what personal information to share in their profile or comments boosted respondents' feelings of safety and supported self-expression.

Safety is closely connected to the sense of community, and communities cannot develop if members are completely unidentifiable. Social networking sites such as Facebook enable users to create a profile; with these profiles people present their identities online. This identity provides opportunities that can support and increase information-sharing, because it is easier for people to relate to one another, and build connections and trust in an online environment (Donath 1999). If communication is purely anonymous there is no build-up of past interactions. With an online identity people can build an online reputation, and this is a major source of online trust (Henderson and Gilding 2004: 504). A message from someone with an online identity contains a wealth of information about the sender (Donath 1999). On the Love Matters Kenya Facebook page some members build reputations as sexual health and relationship experts, commenting on Love Matters posts every day to increase their visibility. Two of these 'super-users' participated in the focus group and said that they often received and answered private messages from other audience members seeking advice.

Online social relationships have become an important motivation for members to participate in the Facebook group. Access to information is often cited as the reason why people join virtual communities (Ridings and Gefen 2004; Wellman *et al.* 1996). However, finding social support and friendship are also crucial motivations for people to join communities and continue community membership (Ridings and Gefen 2004). While observing the Love Matters Facebook group, we noticed that finding new friends was a common online behaviour. People would often comment underneath a quote or remark they liked, 'please add me to your friends list', or 'I send you a pm'. The respondents in the focus group also emphasised the importance of friendships:

> *People can become friends and that this friendship can lead through Love Matters* (female respondent #2).

> *I can get a variety of answers and advice, meet friends. And if a problem of mine is something negative I won't feel alone in my problem* (male respondent #1).

Friendship and the ability to gain and earn trust can explain why social media is such a potentially powerful tool for sexual health organisations. Personal relationships in daily life are an important source of information on sexuality, love and relationships. Research has shown that young people share information on issues related to sexuality with their friends (Bleakley *et al.* 1992; Barker and Rich 1992) and that peer-to-peer learning can be more effective than learning from adults (Medley *et al.* 2009). These friendships are not confined to an online space, but often extend into the real world as young people experience the offline and online as 'mutually constituted' (Pascoe 2011; Evers *et al.* 2013). Respondents in the Facebook group confirmed this statement as they discussed the friendships they had developed through the Love Matters Facebook page.

3.2 Facebook as a village square

Sharing and commenting has become part of the information experience on Facebook. This is also what we observed on the wall of the Love Matters Kenya group. Being able to have fun with comments, connect with others, and share opinions – and to find people who listen, share information and engage in discussion about it – is exactly why people value Facebook groups. Engaging with information becomes a social activity, and this relationship between learning and socialising drives information-sharing across Facebook and other new media platforms. Since participating in this social information experience is an essential part of creating a safe space, it is essential for sexual health organisations to be aware of it. People in the Facebook community use the comment function to connect, often assessing their trustworthiness and viewing them as a potential source of information. In this space they exchange user-generated content with each other.

> *Yeah I like reading comments, because by reading them I get to learn different ideas and options which helps in decision-making* (female respondent #3).

> *In these comments where you get to know how people can freely talk, share their experience thus you gain some information maybe on how to abstain, or how to remain faithful* (female respondent #4).

Through the comments they can see what other people are thinking. The comments are also a source of laughter and fun; as a female respondent noted, 'laughing is always healthy; some comments leave you in a joyful mood'.

Yet not all comments and connections made on the Love Matters Kenya Facebook page are supportive and trustworthy; there is a lot of misinformation, and negative, mean or pornographic content is also exchanged as part of peer-to-peer communication. It is important for sexual health organisations to understand how these comments influence online safe spaces. As with physical, offline spaces, the safety of a particular place always depends on the people who occupy it. As social media raises the issue of community and space, it creates discussions about what constitutes appropriate behaviour (Carey 2015). Respondents in the focus group, when asked about disruptive behaviour, commented:

> *I feel bad when people use some pages to joke or tease others, it's not good* (female respondent #5).

> *I hate it especially when a girl comments her opinion then u see all men reply as they thought she's lonely, I know they even inbox* [send private messages to] *girls but most of them are jokers* (male respondent #2).

To show that this kind of behaviour is not indicative of what the Love Matters Kenya Facebook group stands for, the respondents started talking about the friends they had made and social support they had received by participating. As one respondent pointed out:

> *Not all people have bad intentions, some became friends, then lovers, and finally they got married. I made several friends through Love Matters, real friends who I can call and seek advice* (female respondent #6).

If the goal is to create a safe space for people to express opinions, then a supportive community dynamic is important. In a supportive community setting, people share more information and are more responsive towards each other's viewpoints and opinions. For example, if Audrey's comment about her virginity, quoted in the introduction, had received a more supportive reaction, she could have responded and continued the conversation online.

Nonetheless, negative behaviours affect the community dynamic and make some people feel too uncomfortable to share their opinions with the group. We observed that when a topic was more transgressive, disruptive behaviour on the Facebook wall was more likely. This meant that there was less consensus in the post thread, and also less friending and small-talk conversations.

People were more likely to make threatening comments when a topic was controversial; when discussing homosexuality or sex before marriage, for example, people often commented that anyone involved in these activities should go to hell. This creates a dilemma for sexual health organisations: how can they raise controversial issues while also fostering a supportive community? There is no perfect solution to this question, but one of the key elements is good moderation.

3.3 The importance of moderation

Moderation is a set of rules for social media managers on how to facilitate interaction and prevent abuse (Grimmelmann 2015). These codes of conduct are used to create an online community where everyone feels safe contributing to the discussion. It is a central factor in creating safe and supportive online spaces. An alternative approach to having a moderator is to encourage self-moderation: this is when members of a group with a strong belief in community values address unwanted behaviour themselves. Effective community or self-moderation is often hard to achieve. It relies on a group dynamic and often leads to reactive moderation, responding to comments after they are made.

While codes of conduct help social media managers make decisions about how to interact online, community guidelines communicate social norms to audience members. Members of the Love Matters Kenya Facebook page are asked to abide by these community guidelines, which aim to keep the conversation respectful; those who violate the guidelines get three warnings before they are permanently blocked. The Love Matters Kenya community guidelines consist of a vision of respectful online interaction and a warning about what will happen if you post anything offensive, abusive or graphic:

> We want our Facebook page to be an open forum, so please keep comments and wall posts respectful. Remember, sex is a sensitive subject for many people, so tell us what's on your mind, but be mindful of others! To keep this page a safe and positive place, we will remove offensive, abusive or overly graphic posts. You can read our terms of use here: https://lovematters.co.ke/terms-use (Love Matters Africa Facebook 2016).[5]

Although moderation can be an important tool for minimising abuse and harassment and making online cooperation possible, it can be a difficult balancing act. If moderation is done too often and too strictly, it sends a signal that freedom of speech is not allowed (Wright 2006). Each Love Matters Kenya social media manager has some leeway to decide which comments to allow, which to block, and how to interact with followers. Sometimes these moderation decisions are easy, while at other times it can be difficult to know where to draw the line. For example, Love Matters routinely removes and bans people who post pictures of naked bodies and pornographic images. Comments where people post personal information, such as phone numbers or an address, are also deleted, as is commercial spam. Moderation decisions can be

much more complex, however, as in the case of the comment below on a Facebook article where a man wrote about his attraction to both men and women:

> *I think you should come and kiss me, then I will give you the best beating ever after that u will know what want and what u are, confused idiot* (male respondent #3).

Love Matters does not delete comments like this on Facebook, even though these conversations are not respectful and may be even classified as abusive. Social media managers do not want to censor people, but also recognise that abusive comments have a negative effect on the community atmosphere.

Moderators can avoid excessive censorship and reduce the destructive influence of offensive comments by understanding the importance of small talk among the group and making sure that supportive comments are more visible. Rather than deleting comments, organisations can make use of conversations in the comments that are essentially small talk rather than information exchange. For example, comments such as 'lol', 'I agree', 'great comment', 'hi' or the 'like' button can be useful for the social media manager to guide online interaction. These small-talk conversations are called 'phatic communication': exchanges that are primarily concerned with forming social bonds and opening up lines of communication. The content itself is secondary, but it opens up channels for further conversation. For Love Matters, small talk is how audience members safely engage with information and with a wider community of peers. For example, if someone posted a comment on Facebook confessing their attraction for both men and women, the social media manager could 'like' the message or write a supportive comment underneath, such as 'thank you for sharing'. This acts as a signal to the Facebook community that the organisation and the experts are listening and paying attention to the online interaction. In addition, this supports the role of the social media manager as a gatekeeper to discussions of sensitive issues within the community. When audience members see that someone from the organisation is engaged in the conversation, they feel able to send private Facebook messages asking moderators to post about a particular issue on the timeline.

Love Matters has to connect with its audience on personal and emotional levels, and does this by supporting small-talk conversations and supportive, informative comments. Misinformation is often found in comment threads, and sometimes abuse, but moderators can minimise their impact by promoting more positive responses. It is this personal connection that makes people decide to enter into conversations and remain engaged with the central messages that Love Matters stands for. Moreover, it can motivate them to share and create content, while still remaining respectful of other people's opinions and viewpoints. It is therefore crucial for organisations such as Love Matters to build strong connections with their audience base.

4 Conclusion

Young people experience the online and offline social worlds as 'mutually constituted' (Pascoe 2011): they share information, connect, and build relationships that move from offline to online and back again. If sexual health organisations want to influence the behaviour and attitudes of young people, they have to go to the places where young people spend time – both offline and online – and take part in their conversations (Ralph *et al.* 2011). For Kenyan youth, Facebook has become one of these places: 11 per cent[6] of the population have a Facebook account and this percentage is steadily increasing. This study has limited itself to a discussion of safe spaces on Facebook and how sexual health organisations mitigate the challenges of creating and maintaining these spaces. Further research is needed to understand how sexual health experts can best participate in online spaces and how this influences digital peer-to-peer communication. In addition, the design and capabilities of other social media platforms, such as Twitter, influence whether or not young people perceive them as 'safe'. Cultural differences are also an important factor in understanding the way young people discuss sexuality, whether online or offline.

Through observing the Love Matters Kenya Facebook group, we found that peer-to-peer sharing and trust-building online were everyday activities. For young people, personal friendships are a credible source of sexual information, and Facebook connects these social relationships with reliable information. This makes it a powerful tool. Other studies have found that peer-to-peer sharing on social media can be difficult due to social stigma surrounding sexuality (Evers *et al.* 2013). However, the Love Matters Kenya Facebook group has been generally successful in creating an online safe space for young people to discuss love and relationship issues with their peers and the organisation. The element of safety is crucial, because it has such a strong influence on the quality of the learning experience.

A safe space is a place where people can share their experiences and voice their opinions without fear of abuse. This is not always easy to establish; on the Love Matters Kenya Facebook page people could be supportive, but we also observed abusive and controlling behaviours. So how is it possible to create an online safe space that also fosters free expression? This research led us to conclude that there are three central features of a positive, dynamic online group where learning about sexuality can thrive: (1) the ability to remain distanced, if not completely hidden; (2) online identities that enable users to form friendships; and (3) a sensitive and informed approach to moderation, taking into account the importance of small talk and everyday interactions.

In the context of a Facebook group, the first two criteria have already been met. Good moderation is therefore particularly important as a focus for sexual health organisations. This requires an effort to understand, support and invest resources in online community-building. However, the question emerges, are sexual health programmes actually

allocating budget for maintaining online community-building while the community keeps growing, as they would if the community was offline? This study therefore recommends more research to understand the costs and benefits for sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) programmes when investing in online communities.

Notes

1 We have given respondents pseudonyms.
2 www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm.
3 www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm.
4 See also: Marcotte (2015); Bay-Cheng (2001); Cooper and Griffin-Shelley (2002); Magee *et al.* (2012); Obono (2011).
5 www.facebook.com/LoveMattersAfrica/.
6 www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm

References

Baelden, D.L. van Audenhove, L. and Vergnani, T. (2012) 'Using New Technologies for Stimulating Interpersonal Communication on HIV and AIDS', *Elsevier Telematics and Informatics* 29: 166–76

Barker, G.K. and Rich, S. (1992) 'Influences on Adolescent Sexuality in Nigeria and Kenya: Findings from Recent Focus-Group Discussions', *Studies in Family Planning* 23.3: 199–210

Bay-Cheng, L.Y. (2001) 'SexEd.com: Values and Norms in Web-Based Sexuality Education', *Journal of Sex Research* 38.1: 241–51

Bleakley, A.; Hennessy, M.; Fishbein, M. and Jordan, A. (2009) 'How Sources of Sexual Information Relate to Adolescents' Beliefs about Sex', *American Journal of Health Behavior* 33.1: 37–48

Boellstorff, T. (2008) *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human,* Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press

Boyd, D. (2012) 'The Politics of Real Names: Power, Context, and Control in Networked Publics', *Communications of the ACM* 55.8: 29–31

Brown, E.K. (2011) 'Safe Spaces in Online Learning: The Role of Faculty Perception in Design and Practice', PhD dissertation, Graduate School, University of Georgia, https://getd.libs.uga.edu/pdfs/brown_eric_k_201105_phd.pdf (accessed 24 April 2016)

Carey, J. (2015) 'Digital Media and the Transformation of Space', in G. Einav (ed.), *The New World of Transitioned Media Digital Realignment and Industry Transformation,* New York NY: Springer

Cooper, A. and Griffin-Shelley, E. (2002) 'Introduction. The Internet: The Next Sexual Revolution', in A. Cooper (ed.), *Sex and the Internet: A Guide Book for Clinicians,* New York NY: Brunner Routledge

Crawford, K. (2009) 'Following You: Disciplines of Listening in Social Media', *Continuum* 23–4: 525–35

Donath, J. (1999) 'Identity and Deception in the Virtual Community', in M.A. Smith and P. Kollock (eds), *Communities in Cyberspace*, New York NY: Routledge

Evers, C.W.; Albury, K.; Byron, P. and Crawford, K. (2013) 'Young People, Social Media, Social Network Sites and Sexual Health Communication in Australia: "This is Funny, You Should Watch It"', *International Journal of Communication* 7: 263–80

Grimmelmann, J. (2015) 'The Virtues of Moderation', *Yale Journal of Law and Technology* 17: 42–109

Gupta, G.R. (2000) 'Gender, Sexuality and HIV/AIDS: The What, the Why, and the How', Plenary Address XIIIth International AIDS Conference: International Center for Research on Women (ICRW): 1–8, www.med.uottawa.ca/sim/data/assets/documents/DurbanSpeech.pdf (accessed 2 July 2016)

Henderson, S. and Gilding, M. (2004) ' "I've Never Clicked this Much with Anyone in my Life": Trust and Hyper Personal Communication in Online Friendships', *New Media and Society* 6–4: 487–506

Hennink, M.; Hutter, I. and Bailey, A. (2011) *Qualitative Research Methods,* London: Sage Publications

Hine, C. (2000) *Virtual Ethnography,* London: Sage Publications

Katzer, C.; Fetchenhauer, D. and Belschak, F. (2009) 'Cyberbullying: Who are the Victims?: A Comparison of Victimization in Internet Chat Rooms and Victimization in Schools', *Journal of Media Psychology* 21.1: 25–36

Kenney, M.R. (2001) *Mapping Gay L.A.: The Intersection of Place and Politics,* Philadelphia PA: Temple University Press

Kozinets, R. (2009) *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online,* Thousand Oaks CA: Sage Publications

Magee, J.C.; Bigelow, L.; DeHaan, S. and Mustanski, B.S. (2012) 'Sexual Health Information Seeking Online: A Mixed-Methods Study among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Young People', *Health Education and Behavior: The Official Publication of the Society for Public Health Education* 39.3: 276–89

Marcotte, R.D. (2015) 'Let's Talk about Sex: Australian Muslim Online Discussions', *Contemporary Islam* 9: 65–84

Mbugua, N. (2007) 'Factors Inhibiting Educated Mothers in Kenya from Giving Meaningful Sex-Education to their Daughters', *Social Sciences and Medicine* 64: 1079–89

McKenna, K.Y.A.; Green, A.S. and Smith, P.K. (2001) 'Demarginalizing the Sexual Self', *Journal of Sex Research* 38.4: 302–11

Medley, A.; Kennedy, C.; O'Reilly, K. and Sweat, M. (2009) 'Effectiveness of Peer Education Interventions for HIV Prevention in Developing Countries: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis', *AIDS Education and Prevention: Official Publication of the International Society for AIDS Education* 21.3: 181–206

Obono, K. (2011) 'Media Strategies of HIV/AIDS Communication for Behavior Change in South West Nigeria', *Africana* 5.2: 147–70

Pascoe, C.J. (2011) 'Resource and Risk: Youth Sexuality and New Media Use', *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* 8.1: 37–50

Pearce, K.E. and Vital, J. (2015) 'Performing Honor Online: The Affordances of Social Media for Surveillance and Impression Management in an Honor Culture', *New Media and Society* 1–18

Postill, J. and Pink, S. (2012) 'Social Media Ethnography: The Digital Researcher in a Messy Web', *Media International Australia,* http://blogs.bournemouth.ac.uk/research/files/2013/04/Postill-Pink-socialmedia-ethnography.pdf (accessed 4 May 2015)

Ralph, L.J.; Berglas, N.F.; Schwartz, S.L. and Brindis, C.D. (2011)
'Finding Teens in Their Space: Using Social Networking Sites to
Connect Youth to Sexual Health Services', *Sexuality Research and Social
Policy* 8: 38–49

Reader, B. (2012) 'Free Press vs Free Speech? The Rhetoric of Civility
in Regard to Anonymous Online Comments', *Journalism and Mass
Communication* 4: 495–513

Ridings, C.M. and Gefen, D. (2004) 'Virtual Community Attraction:
Why People Hang Out Online', *Journal of Computer-Mediated
Communication* 10.1, http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2004.
tb00229.x (accessed 18 January 2017)

Rosenfeld, H. and Noterman, E. (2014) 'Safe Spaces: Towards a
Reconceptualization', *The Roestone Collective* 46.5: 1346–65

Wright, S. (2006) 'Government-run Online Discussion Fora:
Moderation, Censorship and the Shadow of Control', *British Journal
of Politics and International Relations* 8: 550–568

Wellman, B.; Salaff, J.; Dimitrova, D.; Garton, L.; Gulia, M. and
Haythornthwaite, C. (1996) 'Computer Networks as Social Networks:
Collaborative Work, Telework, and Virtual Community', *Annual
Review of Sociology* 22: 213–38

This page is intentionally left blank