

**Enhanced Engagement and Youth Participation in Sexual Health Programming:
Effects of Smartphone Communication (WhatsApp)**

Tara Devezin, Mychelle Farmer, Manya Dotson, Alice Liu

Introduction:

Communication advancement via innovative technology has become increasingly popular. As technology expands, youth are frontrunners on awareness and usage of new devices. Previous studies suggest that youth use technology, social media, and messaging systems as a main means of communication. Currently no studies document the impact of new technology on youth participation in health projects.

Objective:

This study is designed to explore youth engagement in sexual health programs as a function of communication through WhatsApp, a smartphone application.

Methods:

This observational study examines the communication patterns and trends among Kenyan university students who use WhatsApp to exchange information during the development of a sexual health program, Brighter Futures. This program empowers students to make life plans, including the choice of a contraceptive method to prevent unintended pregnancy. The WhatsApp group chats are self-sustaining, and students participate voluntarily. The study monitored real-time dialogue regarding gender, relationships, and peer support.

The group consisted of four adult mentors and 50 university students. This study reviewed 82 weeks of WhatsApp discussions.

Results:

Over 5,000 message entries were reviewed for this study. Over 50% of the messages consisted of dialogue related to health, including appropriate sexual behaviors, peer relationships, and gender norms. Male and female students contributed with equal frequency about relationships and health concerns. Students requested and received feedback from peers, particularly concerning protective factors needed to form supportive relationships.

Conclusions:

Smartphone applications provide needed youth support systems that enable information exchange about sexual health. This study found equal participation by male and female students, suggesting that new technologies may facilitate positive, balanced group dynamics.