

Using mobile social networks to stimulate SRH service access and uptake:

the case of Young Africa Live

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At its heart Young Africa Live (YAL) is a simple yet effective m-Health solution that aims to change human behaviours. It communicates life-saving information about HIV/AIDS and sexual health to young people in a way that is engaging, interactive and relevant.

The idea was originally sparked from an observation: In South Africa we have high HIV infection rates and high mobile phone penetration rates, yet none of the large mobile portals held a single piece of information about the pandemic: where to get tested, how to practice safe sex and how to avoid getting infected. This was a crucial gap considering most South African teens do not have access to desktop computers, television or printed material.

YAL now fills that void. A social and lifestyle platform developed by the South Africa-based non-profit Praekelt Foundation, it is a mobile space where young people can discuss topics close to them while at the same time it disseminates important information and promotes sexual health. Key to its strategy is how the HIV information is packaged and the way this 'packaging' of information can be instrumental in whether and how hard-to-reach audiences access health information and health services. An 'edutainment' approach (education plus entertainment) has been extremely successful as our young audiences do not feel that they are being lectured to but are able to engage in discussion with their peers and enjoy their time on the portal.

Three key goals

The key goals of YAL include to share information and educate, to generate discussion and to promote certain safe sexual behaviours.

In terms of sharing information and educating the audience, YAL makes crucial health and lifestyle information available via a mobile-only platform – i.e., in a space where young people already feel comfortable. The aim is to educate and raise awareness among young people in Africa about HIV/AIDS and other sexual health issues in a fun, engaging, interactive, gender-sensitive and entertaining way.

YAL generates discussion through gender-specific blogs (i.e., male and female writers write daily blogs from their gender's perspective) on topics such as HIV/AIDS, health, relationships, sex, sexuality, love and gender issues. Portal visitors can comment and have their voices heard. These 'girl' and 'boy' blogs are proving effective in instilling certain behaviours as young people respond well to peer-to-peer educational material that is not written in a typical provider-beneficiary tone of voice.



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In terms of promoting healthy behaviours, the focus of this platform is on sexual health and lifestyles. Specifically, in a country with the largest HIV/AIDS pandemic in the world, our focus was to promote HIV testing through easy-to-use portal information and linkages to voluntary counselling and testing (VCT) centres. If we conservatively say that 20 per cent of the South African population is HIV-positive, that means 20 per cent of the users on this mobile portal are likely to be HIV-positive but not know their status and be practicing risky behaviours that put themselves and their loved ones at risk of infection. It is therefore crucial that we use this platform to create enough peer pressure through interactive discussion that young people will get tested for HIV.

Working with mobile networks for cost-free access

The YAL engagement model has certain key principles that Praekelt Foundation believes are critical when planning to launch this service in a new country. First, the cost of access to this health information can be a critical barrier to entry if normal mobile Internet usage rates are charged. We therefore work hard at establishing relationships with mobile network operators who can provide zero-rated (free) access to this particular content. In South Africa YAL is hosted on the Vodafone Live! network, which is free for all customers of Vodacom (the country's largest mobile network operator). This removes the major barrier to participation on the portal for our young audience:

cost. In Tanzania Praekelt Foundation has also partnered with Vodacom and YAL works on the same principle of free access to the end-user. In Kenya the platform was launched in January 2012 in partnership with Safaricom.

Ensuring relevant content

The second critical factor in establishing a successful youth-oriented mobile community is good content. Praekelt Foundation believes many traditional health promotion or health service campaigns spend very little time and effort in creating content and delivering it over a channel that is suitable for that particular target audience. Millions of dollars are spent globally on billboards, posters and fliers – not to say that these do not also have a role to play, but we believe if you want to spark a conversation and really influence behaviours, your content must ‘speak the language’ of your target

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In the case of YAL, content consists of a combination of regularly updated, dynamic stories and live chats and a series of permanent content pieces.

The permanent content covers the essential facts around HIV/AIDS as well as providing helpline numbers and contact details for referral organisations that can support YAL-users in times of need. Under the dynamic content section, daily news and celebrity stories are posted and users can ‘like’ the story or leave comments. Guest bloggers write about their experiences with love, sex, dating, cultural dilemmas, gender stereotypes and other relevant issues. In addition, live chats with doctors, relationship experts and HIV-positive activists help create a true dialogue between the portal and its users.

With the huge user base and the sensitivity of the issues discussed, the portal requires extensive monitoring from a team of dedicated individuals to ensure the platform is not exploited.

Community impact

YAL is always abuzz with activity. Here are some comments from users¹ about the impact of YAL on their lives and on their access to health services.

The Venom: ‘Hi yalers! i just wana say dat i’m grateful for yal. it has given us a platform to express our views, concerns and most importantly get in touch with our peers to discuss and explore life through yalers.’

Ananzi: ‘YAL hs realy md up my mnd bcz im nw proud of my pstv status, i hv confidence wn wlknng in de strt an i blv dat i stl hs a lng lyf 2 go live nomtr wt my status is.’ (For those of us struggling to read the teen-tech-speak: ‘YAL has really made up my mind, because I’m now proud of my positive status. I have confidence

when walking in the street and I believe that I still have a long life to live no matter what my status is’.)

Nkosingiphile: ‘YAL made me aware of STIs like i thought you can catch an STI in a toilet sit and it also made me aware of the fact that if you are a virgin its impossible to have some STIs. So as a young man YAL have opened my mind and also tought me to practice safe sex, and also be aware of unprotected sex.’

Matshapo: ‘YAL realy helped me deal with my problems. i was pregnant and wanted to make abortion, but i didnt make it because of friends who gave me advices on YAL.’

Nonkolosa: ‘i told her i didn’t have condom, she said no problem and my mind thinking about YAL guidance, i wear my clothes and say i will be back, even now i would say thank YAL u make me to have a good responsibility.’

From user comments such as the above, we can see how access to health services, whether it is something as basic as ‘where do I find condoms?’ or ‘where do I get treated for my STD?’ to more complex issues such as ‘where can I get a safe abortion?’ are being discussed on an m-Health platform like YAL.

The South Africa Youth Sex Survey was conducted on the YAL in the early part of 2011. It revealed some interesting findings. In a lot of ways youth are well informed and their answers are encouraging, yet in many other ways there is a great deal of ground to cover with projects such as YAL. Some pertinent statistics include that 44 per cent of our users are sexually active, 81 per cent say that not disclosing an HIV+ status to a partner is the same as murder and 23 per cent blame the way women dress for the high incidence of rape. For more, see the video on YouTube at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=WUHCVDpl7ug

We will run the same survey every year in order to assess the affect of YAL on driving changing opinions and behaviours.

Increasing popularity

Since its launch on 1 December 2009 YAL has been growing in momentum. Every month there are more than 70,000 new unique users joining the portal, 94,000 new comments on stories and, on average, 4 million page views. YAL is now the most popular section of Vodafone Live! in South Africa.

With over 903,000 unique users, 1.9 million comments and 73 million page views, YAL is having a profound effect on the lives of South African youth.

Endnote

¹ These are users’ self-selected pseudonyms (and their spelling has been retained in the comments).

Gustav Praekelt is the managing director of Praekelt Digital. After completing his B.Sc. in Computer Science and Philosophy, he co-founded one of the first digital interactive studios in Africa and was its technical director for 10 years. His belief in the power of mobile phones to transform Africa inspired him to establish the Praekelt Foundation in 2006. For more information on the Foundation, contact Marcha Neethling, Head of Operations, at marcha@praekeltfoundation.org or Colin Abouchabki, Chief Operating Officer, at colin@praekeltfoundation.org