

Sex education for young people on the Internet: Lessons from *Chezasalama* initiative

Helen Prytherch, Cordula Schuemer, Akwillina Mlay, Minou Fuglesang, Agnes Kabigi, Vida Mwasalla & Richard Nkwera



A young Tanzanian visiting Chezasalama Website

Chezasalama is an interactive website in Kiswahili and English, which delivers facts about sexual and reproductive health and lifestyle in a fresh, youthful and colourful way. Conceptualised for, and by, Tanzanian youth aged between 12-24 years, the response to the initiative that was launched in April 2004, has been surprising.

The Kiswahili name “*Chezasalama*” stands for “play it safe” or “play safe”. The website covers topics such as falling in love, having sex, condoms, drug use and gender-based violence to the latest in the “bongo flava” music scene. The website takes an ‘edutainment’ approach – entertaining and educating.

In the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region, Tanzania is a leading country in terms of proliferation of the Internet/Internet cafés in urban areas (UNDP, 2001).¹

Chezasalama was produced, and is maintained, through a partnership of three organisations working in Tanzania to promote openness about sexual and reproductive health and lifestyle issues: The Femina Health Information Programme (HIP), Student Partnership Worldwide (SPW) and the German Technical Co-operation’s “Tanzanian German Programme to Support Health”, (GTZ).

GTZ commissioned *Chezasalama* following a survey that explored the profile of Internet café users in Dar es Salaam and Tanga regions. It found that Internet use time was divided between e-mailing, listening to music and surfing news, sports and sex sites. Users were predominately male (63%) and younger ones, mainly secondary school students, who depend on pocket money to visit cafés.

Twenty-eight percent (95/320) used the Internet to search for educational materials. Sixty percent of young users had knowledge of word processing, 90% had e-mail addresses and 87% had moderate to high level skills in Internet use. All wanted more information in Kiswahili (Simba, 2003).²

There aren’t many places you can talk about such issues in our culture. With the computer the “silence” about these issues is broken.

Chezasalama built on messages previously promoted in print and via drama and peer education, but employs a new medium to convey them. It seeks to respond to the needs of the target group based on available knowledge about the group’s sexual and reproductive health behaviour. By the time they reach 16 years, most young people in Tanzania are sexually active, as follows:

- More than half of all Tanzanian young women are mothers before they are 20 years old; a quarter of them are mothers or pregnant by the time they are 17. Pregnant girls have to leave school.
- The 2003-04 Tanzania HIV/AIDS Indicator Survey (THIS) shows 3.5% of young people aged 15-24 are infected with HIV. Adolescent girls are more susceptible than boys. Only 40% of 15-19 year-olds have comprehensive knowledge of HIV and AIDS.

It was, therefore, decided that the website should not only provide facts and alert the youth, but engage them in discussion to support a gradual change in attitudes and behaviour.

Chezasalama has been popular since its launch. In 2007, there was an average of 90 daily visitors, with the figure sometimes reaching 250. The average number of monthly visitors between January 2000 and January 2008 was 2,700. The Tanzania All Media and Product Survey (TAMPS) 2007, cited *Chezasalama* as the second most popular website in the country.³

Analysis of most frequently accessed pages shows that HIV is an important topic for the users, although other sexuality topics are equally important to young people. Most people access the Kiswahili version. The most frequently visited pages are sexuality/sexual pleasure and sexuality/pregnancy followed by HIV pages, love and life, other sexuality topics and various forms of abuse.

Laetitia Temu, a frequent website visitor, says: “I visit the Kiswahili version of course; this is easier for me. The topics covered are broad – like love (*mapenzi*), pregnancy (*mimba*) HIV and AIDS (*ukimwi*). There aren’t many places you can talk about such issues in our culture. With the computer the ‘silence’ about these issues is broken.”

An evaluation of 193 users, who responded to an Internet questionnaire for two weeks in November 2006, showed that 93% of users are from Tanzania (spread across all

regions). Few responses were from Kenya, Uganda and overseas. Most users were male (69%). They visit *Chezasalama* because it is educative (58%), contains new information (16%), offers freedom of self-expression (10%) or it is enjoyable (9%).



Vijana wanacheza salama (Young people dancing safely)

The virtual space for open and anonymous discussions on taboo issues such as masturbation and sex, sexual orientation, puberty, pregnancy and contraceptives attracts not only the target group, but also teachers and parents – with 70% of respondents indicating that they are aged 24 -30 years (above the age of the intended target).

The reasons for this appear to lie in financial ability to use Internet cafés or being able to access the Internet at the workplace (41%) and the limited SRH information available in general (Sodemann, 2006).⁴

“I have always wanted to share my very personal feelings but was shy to approach anyone. Now the discussion forum has taken care of it,” Najma Musa, a regular user of the website, said. Sabri Ndabise concurs: “I only started to use the discussion forum after a friend showed me how to log on. Sometimes, though I feel shy at the coarse, slang Kiswahili people use – but still you can learn what people really think about issues like sex and condoms – things they would never say to your face.”

Seventy-six percent of the survey’s respondents reported accessing HIV and AIDS information, with many of them stating that they had changed their behaviour (26%) as they had learned about health risks such as unsafe sex, and where and why it was

helpful to go for voluntary counselling and testing (VCT). Thirty-two percent reported sharing what they learnt on the site with their friends, family members or others.

From February 2004 to end of March 2008, the discussion forum had 4,827 registered users. On average, three people participate in the forum daily. Some postings show active sharing and learning, for example on whether the girl or boy in a relationship should be the one to buy condoms.

However, concerns exist about quality control as the discussion forum is largely not moderated. The challenge is striking a balance between it being a place where young people can exchange views, receive comments and ask their peers questions in an “uncensored” environment or being a place where misinformation and prejudices thrive. The website’s online editor removes abusive comments that express negative views of certain groups such as prostitutes or homosexuals, and efforts are made to introduce more rational and balanced debates on such issues and on the harmful effects of stigma and discrimination.

Discussions on the negative effects of masturbation and about which types of sex are “normal” as opposed to “immoral” attract a lot of attention

Analysis of debates in the discussion forum reveals widespread misconceptions. Discussions on the negative effects of masturbation and about which types of sex are “normal” as opposed to “immoral” attract a lot of attention. A lot of confusion exists on which type of sex is more protective against HIV infection. Some active participants believe homosexuals and lesbians are not found in Africa.

Developing appropriate responses and material to address misconceptions is very resource-intensive and was initially underestimated by those who established the website. Still, great satisfaction is derived from this initiative by all involved

due to its wide appeal and overall appreciation by young people. Users note that the Internet is wonderful as it doesn’t “run out”. Printed flyers and posters are always in short supply, but *Chezasalama* is there all the time. As a young regular user says, “*Chezasalama* is a good way to learn and make friends. We are always looking forward to getting online.” ■

Helen Prytherch

Swiss Centre for International Health

Cordula Schuemer

Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ)

Akwillina Mlay, Vida Mwasalla & Richard Nkwera

Tanzanian German Programme to Support Health (GTZ)

Minou Fuglesang & Agnes Kabigi

Femina Health Information

Correspondence:

Helen Prytherch

Swiss Tropical Institute

Basel 4002, Switzerland

E-mail: Helen.Prytherch@yahoo.com

Cordula Schuemer

Postfach 5180, 65726 Eschborn, Germany

Akwillina Mlay, Vida Mwasalla, Richard Nkwera

PO Box 65350, Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania

Minou Fuglesang, Agnes Kabigi

PO Box 2065, Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania

1. United Nations Development Programme. 2001. *Human Development Report: Making New Technologies Work for Human Development*. Oxford University Press for UNDP, New York, p. 3. [<http://hdr.undp.org/reports/global/2001/en/pdf/front.pdf>]
2. Simba, D. 2003. *The Use of Internet Cafés by Young People in Dar-es-Salaam and Tanga: Towards the Development of a Website on Reproductive Health and HIV/AIDS*. Report Commissioned by GTZ
3. Steadman Group. 2007. *Tanzania All Media and Product Survey (TAMPS)*.
4. Sodemann, M. 2006. *Online Survey of the Website “Chezasalama”*, Report conducted for the Tanzanian German Programme to Support Health /GTZ