Towards collaborative communication approaches for primary HIV prevention? Assessing the opportunities of new technologies for addressing AIDS-fatigue, stimulating dialogical learning, and identifying sexual scripts: A case study at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa

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Abstract

This study aims at gaining insights into how (the interactive nature) of computer-mediated technologies can benefit HIV prevention purposes in a South African higher education context. While recent research suggests that HIV prevalence in South African higher education institutions (HEIs) is considerably lower compared to the national prevalence, it is believed that tertiary education students merit particular attention. Low risk-perceptions and the liberal atmosphere typical for campus environments may facilitate the adoption of lifestyles that render students vulnerable to HIV. However, research also suggests that young people increasingly experience feelings of AIDS-fatigue. If this observation is accurate, HEIs urgently need to devise creative and innovative solutions to keep attracting young adults’ attention. In this respect, new technologies, and computers and the internet in particular, could have a number of advantages compared to traditional media. Their novel and innovative character might relate better to the social world of young adults. In addition, HIV prevention approaches are increasingly focusing on the process of interpersonal communication. New technologies and the internet in particular have a number of unique characteristics, such as interactivity and anonymity, which could make them more appropriate than traditional channels to spur interpersonal communication on HIV and AIDS-related matters. However, while new technologies could be more appropriate to attract higher education students’ attention in times of AIDS-fatigue, there is currently insufficient evidence to support these claims.

The objectives of this study are threefold: (1) to investigate whether HIV prevention campaigns making use of new technologies are able to assist in lessening feelings of AIDS-fatigue among higher education students; (2) to explore whether online student-generated content can be used for identifying locally constructed sexual scripts; and (3) to examine whether new technologies can assist in stimulating dialogical learning on HIV and AIDS-related issues. In this respect, this document discusses the theory of transformative learning and how it can be applied to analyse the outcomes of an asynchronous computer-mediated collaborative learning tool in a higher education context. As such, this study seeks to investigate whether computer-mediated collaborative interactions can spur individuals to become critically self-reflective about their understanding of sexuality and HIV and AIDS. This study also aims at contributing to theoretical debates on (1) the paradigms in the field of communication for development and HIV prevention, (2) the social construction of sexuality and the importance of agency, and (3) computer supported collaborative learning and the conditions necessary to create an ideal learning situation for dialogical learning (on health related issues).

This inquiry is set up as a case study at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa, in which several computer-mediated HIV prevention campaigns have been developed, implemented and evaluated. This
study mainly uses qualitative and to a lesser extent quantitative research methods. Data was gathered through individual in-depth, focus group, and expert interviews, verbatim copy of online student-generated content, online tracking tools, and self-administered questionnaires. Data was analyzed using (online) inductive thematic analysis, deductive category application, and descriptive statistical analysis.

The results of this inquiry are mixed. Evidence was found that many students experience feelings of AIDS-fatigue. These are mediated by campaign-fatigue, a culture of silence surrounding HIV and AIDS, and perceptions of powerlessness with regard to HIV and AIDS. Although the implementation of the computer-mediated HIV interventions appear to be able to address feelings of AIDS-fatigue to a certain extent – due to the novel, innovative and interactive character of new technologies – infrastructural challenges remain a barrier. The interactive computer-mediated campaign proved to be able to stimulate dynamic participation and discussion among the students included in this research. The student-generated content was found to be useful for identifying sexual scripts and social constructions of sexuality among student communities. However, while new technologies are to a large extent able to stimulate interpersonal communication on HIV and AIDS-related issues – when formally integrated into the curriculum and built-in assessment is provided – among higher education students, this study provided little evidence to support the idea that students engage in transformative learning processes on HIV and AIDS-related issues when using online dialogical learning environments. The results of this study suggest that in order for critical reflection to occur, a number of requirements need to be fulfilled. These include the provision of an ideal learning situation (e.g. asynchronous and written character), conditions (e.g. lecturer involvement and the provision of an instructional model), and context (e.g. infrastructure, attitudes towards official educational technology, and assessment frameworks). This study therefore concludes with proposing an extended theoretical model on the ideal learning situation for computer supported collaborative learning on health-related matters.