Young people's views about the potential for online participatory interventions

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background

- Interventions to prevent VAWG are increasingly moving to online spaces. Safety and educational apps.
- Little research/evidence on whether group-based participatory violence prevention interventions, focused on transformative communication, can be delivered online.
- Is it possible to create a safe social space online, sufficient to enable transformative communication to occur?
To understand young people’s perspectives on the likely feasibility, acceptability and challenges of group-based participatory violence prevention interventions developed and delivered online.
Eastern Cape, South Africa.

Urban setting.

Both private schools (fee-paying) and government-funded schools (free education).
Semi-structured in-depth interviews (~ 57 minutes).

18 school-going adolescents (16-19 years).

Analysis - pre-defined framework focused on transformative communication: *dialogue, sharing and reflection*.
Findings

Young people are keen and open to the idea of online interventions.

Transformative communication online is possible, but a complex process due to the intricacies in establishing safe social spaces, and specifically establishing requisites such as:

- Privacy and safety.
- Trust and disclosure.
- Sense of community.
Online platforms, cell phones and data

Findings

- Young people’s reference for online platforms revolved around Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Zoom and MS Teams.

- Majority of young people had personal smart cell phones. Phone usage was sometimes regulated by parents.

- Access to data differed across socio-economic groups and this influenced the apps they preferred to engage on. Those with limited access preferred apps with free access or low data usage.
Privacy and Safety

Findings

- Reported ease in achieving privacy in the physical world - home and in their phone usage (most – 16/18 – had personal smart cell phones).

- Worried about online privacy in terms of their information being shared elsewhere e.g., through ‘screen shots’, ‘hacking’ and forwarding of messages.

- Conflictual communication manifests easily online when compared to face-to-face interactions.
Strategies to navigate privacy and safety online

- Preference for sharing sensitive information in groups considered safe and private e.g., family WhatsApp groups.
- Use of passwords on cell phones and online to safeguard information.

Findings
Disclosure and trust

Findings

• Some felt anonymity (e.g., use of pseudonyms or other disguises) in online groups, such as avatars, could be useful in promoting disclosure of sensitive information in online interventions, while others felt anonymity could hamper building of trust in the group.

• Trust shaped how the adolescents disclosed their personal information online, and via which platform.
Strategies to promote disclosure and trust online

Findings

- Groups comprising of people with an existing trusting relationship.
- Use of video links to read non-verbal cues to build trust.
Redefined community from what we know and have previously used in demarcating intervention communities. Young people spoke of communities in the sense of shared beliefs, goals and a sense of belonging.
Sense of Community Online

Findings

- Reported experiencing a sense of belonging and community in online groups perhaps due to prior experiences of forming, and maintaining, relationships and communities online.

But their frame of reference for community was quite different to that of participatory interventions. They were referring to that they experienced in Facebook groups e.g., COVID-19 groups. They had no experience of relationships such as those that would be required in participatory interventions online.
Strategies to attain sense of community online

Findings

• Groups that comprise of friends with new members being introduced by an existing group member to preserve the sense of community and feelings of trust in the group.
Limitations

• Only adolescents who were able to obtain signed informed consent forms from their parents took part in the study, and therefore crucial perspectives from those who were not able to obtain informed consent might have been missed.

• Only school-going adolescents were involved in the study, leaving out participation of a sub-section of the young population.
Limitations

- We only sampled from an urban area, and we might have missed important views from rural areas.

- Young people had no prior experience engaging in participatory interventions, limiting their ability to imagine these interventions online.
While this study has showed that there are currently challenges in delivering online participatory interventions, these interventions will become a reality, and it is better that they are driven by theoretically informed approaches, and scientific evidence.
Conclusion

Group-based participatory prevention interventions rely on three interlinked factors: privacy, trust and safety; which shape dialogue, disclosure and reflection. Specific strategies to resolve these will be a great stride towards achieving transformative communication online.
Efforts to understand how to address these interlinked issues online need to centralise young people’s voices as they are active in navigating these challenges in their daily lives.
Further research on how trust and privacy can be established online is critical for supporting disclosure in online participatory interventions.

Further research is needed on how safe social spaces can be conceptualised in online interventions.
Research Needs & Recommendations

- Participatory interventions online are going to happen, so we need to be central to developing, and rigorously testing/piloting these interventions, to gain a deeper understanding; and build on what is possible.

- Begin parallel research on evaluating online participatory interventions, to gather evidence on their impact.
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