

Debunking Sexual Myths in Bangladesh through an Intervention on the Internet

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Abstract : In Bangladesh, a country in which adults (both parents and teachers) find it particularly hard to speak with youth about sexuality, adolescents seem to struggle with various insecurities about their sexual feelings, thoughts, behavior and physical characteristics. On the basis of a large number of interviews and focus groups with rural and urban Bangla adolescent girls and boys of lower and middle class as part of the large-scale three-year project 'Breaking the Shame', we have identified ten sexual themes or 'myths' that youth struggle with most. These encompass amongst others beliefs and insecurities on masturbation, discharge, same-sex behavior and feelings, the effects of watching porn and gender norms. We argue that the Internet is a particularly suitable medium to 'debunk' those myths, as youth can consult it anonymously and privately and so avoid social shame. Moreover, amongst the myths, we have identified two kinds which may need different debunking techniques. One kind of myth concerns scientifically uncontested, generally biological related information, such as the effects of having sex with a pregnant woman, questions on the effects of a penile or vaginal discharge or questions on the effects of masturbation. The second kind of myths concerns more diverse information sources and deals with e.g. religious or culturally specific norms, such as on the meaning and existence of homosexuality or gender appropriate norms of behavior in Bangladesh. For addressing both kinds of myths, expert information including a wealth of references to information resources needs to be provided, which the Internet is very suitable for. For the second kind of myths, adolescents also need to learn how to deal with sometimes conflicting norms and information sources, and they need to develop and reflect on their own opinions as part of their identity formation. On the basis of a literature review, we thus distinguish general information needs from identity formation needs, which includes the need to be able to relate information and opinions to one's own opinions and situation. Hence, we argue that youth not only need abstract expert information to be able to debunk sexual myths, but also the option to discuss this information with other adolescents and compare their own situation and opinions with other peers, who in that way serve as 'warm experts' for each other. In this paper, we will describe the outcomes of our qualitative study above. In addition, we will present our findings of an intervention by presenting youth with general, uncontested information on the Internet with additional peer discussion options to compare the debunking effects on different kinds of myths.

Keywords : peer discussion, intervention, sexual myths, shame

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