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Software helping break the silence about sex in Rwanda



By Emmanuel Côme Mugisha (/node/877035)

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Talking about sex is almost taboo (<https://www.newtimes.co.rw/section/read/72394>) in Rwanda. The age of sexual debut is dropping (<https://www.newtimes.co.rw/news/if-you-are-under-18-law-limits-your-access-reproductive-health-services-it-time-change>) below 15 and adolescents report high levels of coercion in their first sexual experiences.

The majority (<https://www.newtimes.co.rw/news/hiv-most-rampant-among-female-youth-males>) of new HIV infections are in young girls and teen pregnancy rates are rising. (<https://www.newtimes.co.rw/news/over-78000-babies-born-teen-mothers-four-years>)

Studies show that these trends are driven primarily by absence of candid conversations (<https://www.newtimes.co.rw/lifestyle/dukataze-grooming-young-women-independence>) about sexual and reproductive health and relationships with adolescents.

Leveraging on the current digital boom (<https://www.newtimes.co.rw/news/how-best-leverage-growth-mobile-phone-penetration>) in the country, a local group is using a chatbot to break that silence.

A chatbot simply is software that allows humans and computers to talk to each other as if it is two humans chatting.

The technology was developed by a local NGO known as the Rwanda Women's Network (RWN) and a Canadian market research firm, Rival Technologies in partnership with Proteknôn Foundation for Innovation and Learning, also a Canadian Foundation.

Via Facebook Messenger, young adolescents from remote areas are using a chatbot dubbed IrindeBot (<https://www.facebook.com/IrindeBot/>) to learn about sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR

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(<https://www.newtimes.co.rw/news/reproductive-health-first-lady-pushes-policy-shift-africa>)) and relationships.

Users can also initiate a conversation via “*Menya Wirinde*” (learn so you can protect yourself) Facebook page or replying to the page posts.

For the past six months, the technology was tested and proved promising for scaling up.

The bot is targeting at-risk youth and their parents or caregivers for frank conversations about sex and relationships, developers say.

Developers opted for Facebook because of popularity especially in the youth, including in rural communities. According to StatCounter, a database of global internet statistics, Facebook owns 56 per cent of social media market share in Rwanda.

Today, over 5,000 users have talked to the bot of whom about 1,200 have gone through the full two hours of content and quizzes.

How it works

The chatbot works in Kinyarwanda or English, text or audio, depending on user preference. First users search for ‘IrindeBot’ on Facebook. Click on Send Message and type anything like ‘Hi’, the chatbot replies instantly with an option to choose a language.

From there, you trade brief introductions (you must be 13 years old or older) before diving into a more serious, honest and private chat.

Using a combination of simple text, audio, mini dramas and image selection, IrindeBot is also accessible to users with low literacy. Unlike most media platforms such as radio, the chatbot allows for a two-way interaction with fun, according to Gisèle Umutoniwase, the coordinator IrindeBot project.

Rubavu in fresh bid to diversify tourism (</news/rubavu-fresh-bid-diversify-tourism>)

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The technology has some downsides, however. IrindeBot is not powered by artificial intelligence, so you can only select buttons and enter a limited amount of text (only when asked). But it allows a user to upload comments and questions and receive a response from a trained, human associate.

Also, you can't go back and change your responses and weak connectivity can block the conversation.

Overcoming pertinent issues

Topics about sexuality in many Rwandan households are frowned upon

(<https://www.newtimes.co.rw/lifestyle/road-ahead-young-people-and-birth-control>), says Mary Balikungeri, founder and director of RWN.

“We are trying to find innovative ways to engage young people on the issues of SRHRs in a fun way to learn and share and not feel judged at all,” Balikungeri said.

IrindeBot is providing straight-up answers to the most sensitive questions about sex, gender-based violence (<https://www.newtimes.co.rw/news/investigators-trained-gbv-and-child-abuse-case-management>), love and reproduction. Balikungeri observed that it is helping parents realise the importance of dialoging about sex and not as taboo but as part of people's health.

The initiative sheds light on how digital technology may be useful to tackle emerging issues.

(<https://www.newtimes.co.rw/covid-19/how-covid-19-accelerating-digital-transformation-rwanda>)

Traditional social norms, lack of access to accurate information and poverty are some of the reasons behind growing numbers of teen mothers, premature marriages and high HIV infections among young people.

“These issues led us to think about how to shape accurate information that is tailored and friendly to adolescents,” said Andrew Ndahiro, a gender activist and deputy director at RWN.

Backers of the technology plan to scale it up to more target groups such as the privileged class of young people on Instagram. They are also expanding to other countries including Kenya, Brazil and India.

In order to cater for those who don't have access to mobile phones, RWN had young people in communities and provided them with shareable smartphones.

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