AI4D

Helping young people become HIV-aware in Kenya

The Public Health Threat

- Adolescents and young adults account for 40% of new HIV infections in Kenya, with females bearing a higher burden.

- Factors that include stigma, knowledge gaps, social norms and structural barriers, hinder testing and treatment.

"we saw the need to come up with a technological solution, to enable more understanding, more testing, more disclosure, and more awareness amongst them."

Dr. Victoria Mukami

The Story

Dr. Victoria Mukami, an informatics expert from the University of Embu in Kenya is one of 4 cofounders of the Beshte project.

"We saw this problem in our youth - where HIV was leading, and so we decided to do something about it, as traditional interventions are not working. This is what you can call the neglected generation," she says. No specific intervention has been designed for them, and having grown up with HIV, they have what she calls "HIV fatigue" - to the point where some won't even take medication.

The Result

- Beshte, the chatbot, speaks English, Swahili and a slangy mix of the two - and guides users to medical services. It was piloted with 100 young people.

"The knowledge base was developed by the users, with the users."   Dr. Victoria Mukami

- These young people subsequently used the pilot's WhatsApp group to ask if they could share the bot with friends.

An Innovative Solution

A chatbot co-created with the input of psychologists, counsellors, and secondary and high school students.

Learning

- Users wanted the chatbot to answer all SRH questions:
- The team is working to broaden the SRH knowledge base, helping adolescents and adolescent mothers to understand the role of SRH in preventing more unwanted pregnancies.
- The team expected most users to be female:
- 55% of users are male.

- To strike the right tone, the team avoided LLMs in developing responses. Instead they wrote them, having a counsellor check each one.

"We wanted sympathetic responses. We didn't want the bot saying 'Sorry, I don't understand.'"

Dr. Consolata Gakii

Community Engagemement

The team has posted a link to Beshte online to reach beyond formal education settings. The team has raised funds to further research youth in work, with an upcoming pilot for 60 users.

"Every community is unique. The question is, always, are they talking to our local problems?"

Dr. Consolata Gakii

Users say:

Peter, an Embu University student:

" People... learn through... whatever they are hearing from people. But... you can go in, ascertain... confirm, is it really true? What can I do?"

Kinya, who has just begun working in community health:

" I really can speak to Beshte like a friend...I can speak in Swahili or English or slang... I've learned things I never knew."

Moving Forward

The team is seeking support that will help them to:
- Have the chatbot introduced in school curricula.
- Add a component capable of referring HIV positive users to counselling.
- Incorporate more languages.
- Explore taking Beshte to more East Africa countries.

LEARN MORE

- AI4D: https://www.ai4d.ai
- HASH: https://hash.theacademy.co.ug
- University of Embu: https://embuni.ac.ke
- The Global Health Network: https://ai-globalhealthresearch.tghn.org/

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