Digital storytelling in sex education: avoiding the pitfalls of building a 'haram' website

Borghuis, P.; de Graaf, C.; Hermes, J.

[Link to publication](#)

Digital storytelling in sex education.
Avoiding the pitfalls of building a 'haram' website.

Pauline Borghuis

Ir., research fellow Media, Culture and Citizenship
INHolland University
Email: pauline.borghuis@inholland.nl

Christa de Graaf

Research fellow Media, Culture and Citizenship
INHolland University
Email: christa.degraaf@inholland.nl

Joke Hermes

Professor of Media, Culture and Citizenship
INHolland University
Email: joke.hermes@inholland.nl

Research group Media, Culture and Citizenship
Domain of Communication, Media and Music
INHolland University

Abstract

This article discusses a participant design research project. The project aimed to provide information about sex and sexuality to groups considered to be vulnerable due to lack of knowledge and cultural barriers. The researchers worked with their students (from highly diverse cultural background) to gather interview material that in turn was used by these students to write 'life stories'. Although not digital storytelling as it is usually defined, the group for whom the website was built did not author their own stories directly, participant design can be understood as a form of 'digital storytelling light'. In regard of presenting information about sexuality in an acceptable manner, this combined design and research method worked well. The article provides examples from the interview material, the life stories and reactions posted on the websites that were built on internet for a for Moroccan and Turkish-Dutch youngsters, the intended audience.

Keywords: Participant design, digital storytelling 'light', sex education.

The project and digital storytelling

In this paper we will discuss how we used digital storytelling as a tool in sex education. We had been asked to contribute to the construction of a website

about sex education with an attractive Q&A (Question and Answer) module, consisting of over 350 questions and answers and 8 life stories about relationships, partner choice, sexuality, the male-and female body, sexuality beyond accepted boundaries, sexual problems and Islam, and sexuality generally, specifically aimed at Turkish and Moroccan youngsters in the age of 15-25 in The Netherlands.
([www.marokko.geentaboes.nl and www.geentaboes.hababam.nl](www.marokko.geentaboes.nl).)

Our partners in building the website were the RNG (Rutergs Nisso Group, Dutch centre for sexual education), Marokko Media (Moroccan ethno marketing bureau and publisher of www. marokko.nl) and students of the University of INHolland.

Based on information gathered in 50 interviews with target group members conducted by students of the University of INHolland Amsterdam, the same students wrote 8 authentic and credible life stories with Turkish and Moroccan characters dealing with difficulties, dilemmas and choices about being in love, what partner they would like to choose, homosexuality, sexual abuse, getting pregnant, getting an STD (sexually transmitted disease), adultery and so on. In the life stories the characters show how they experience events around these topics, what their doubts are, what dilemmas they face, what choices they make. The stories have an open ending, so as to elicit reactions of the website visitors target group. Links are put in the stories in order to direct youngsters to reliable information about specific topics themselves and to invite them to discuss sexuality with each other in a forum.

In addition, a total of 17 Turkish-Dutch and Moroccan-Dutch young people were recruited via the University of INHolland and Marokko Media (publisher of the websites and an 'ethno' marketing bureau) to participate in the project as a feedback-, communication advisory- and editorial team. To construct this (sub) website we used a form of digital storytelling in which our student investigators acted as cultural mediators between the site and the target group. Once the life stories were placed on the Internet, the web site users, all community members, took over, and then a more direct form of digital storytelling came into being.

Relationship between sex education and Islam

At the start of our project a number of sex education websites for Moroccan and Turkish youngsters were available online in the Netherlands.[i] However, none of these sites specifically addressed Islam and sex. We learned later (via the student interviews) that Turkish and Moroccan teenagers feel little addressed by these sites. They hardly ever visit them. They feel their voice is not heard; they cannot identify with the sites but rather feel repulsion and rejection.[ii] We wanted to be sure not to make the same mistakes. By involving community members and giving them space to discuss with each other in order to find their own questions and answers and by 'facilitating' instead of educating we tried to do it differently. The target group was given the means to

direct and partially control what subjects were addressed and how. Digital storytelling was our tool.

Public debate, lack of education

The combination of sexuality and Islam is a delicate subject in Dutch society. It is more than just an awkward issue in public debate (women's oppression and Islam, homophobia, virginal membrane correction, and xenophobia); [iii] it is also a real, material social problem. According to the Research Bureau for Policy (SCP) on behalf of the Ministry of Health, Dutch teenagers of Moroccan and Turkish descent have less knowledge about sexuality and sexual health and experience more problems with sexuality, teenage pregnancy, sexually transmitted disease and so on. Sex education in compulsory high schools is not appropriate to (religious) migrant groups: Muslim girls put their hands over their eyes; [iv] Turkish and Moroccan boys make jokes and walk out of the classroom. In their home situation, talking about sex is taboo. Mothers do talk about this issue with their children but fathers are not involved out of respect for their fatherly authority and possible loss of that authority by discussing not just private but 'haram' subjects.[v]

Earlier research by the Rutgers Nisso Group, a foundation for sex education, and the 'SOA AIDS Netherlands' foundation also shows that migrants are overrepresented in the numbers of young people with sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies.[vi] They are more often offenders and victims of sexual violence than other groups. The State Secretary of Health, Jet Bussemaker, made money available in 2008 especially to educate boys as they specifically know less about relations and sex. They receive less sex education at home than girls do. Apart from money for more sex education in schools, the State Secretary felt the Internet would be a useful forum to achieve her goals for increased sexual health and well-being.[vii] Our project received a grant out of the funding she made available; we collaborated with the Rutgers Nisso Group and Marokko Media (publisher of the two sites that were used).

Aims of emancipation

As public intellectuals working as teachers and researchers with a mixed university population (over 60% students with more than one cultural background) we feel it is our responsibility to contribute to the emancipation of Muslim youngsters. As teachers we feel that respect is of paramount importance. We want to be sensitive to other cultural backgrounds while insisting on mutual respect for all cultural values — definitely a mission that is more often preached than practiced. As researchers, we feel equally strongly that emancipation is a crucial right for everybody, whether a woman or a man, gay, or of lower class-background. The integrity of the human body is sacrosanct to us; religion cannot stand before culture. We all have the right to decide about what happens to and with our bodies.

Obviously this project forced us to see how we too prioritize parts of our backgrounds and convictions. So be it. A second danger in this project would be to either act or be perceived as 'voyeurs', hoping to exoticize 'oriental Others' (cf. Edward Said, 1978). But this project has nothing to do with either voyeurism or colonialism. If anything, it is an old-fashioned feminist project. We want to make it possible for young Dutch Muslims to find ways to talk about and experience sex in terms of respect and dignity, in ways that are respectful and sensitive to how young people themselves experience their cultural and religious heritage in a multicultural society. We wanted the two websites to be a place where they can have their own voice, where they can feel truly 'heard' and where there is room for the diversity we know exists within these two groups. Sex is private, but there should be places for everybody

where experiences can be exchanged, where – in true dialogue – views can be amended and real choices can be made. While we want sex to remain private, reflection on sexual practice, possibilities and identities is definitely a public issue.

As we made clear above, we take a feminist position. Such a position, for us, includes defining gender and sexuality as social constructions. While gender and sexuality have become semi-'natural' categories, fixed by biology, we choose to question such categories and the type of power effect they have (cf Flax, 1982). As we see it, openness to sexual autonomy and choice is now blocked by binary, biologized definitions. As we will show below, discussion of homosexuality is as far as it goes and this is definitely dangerous territory. Other sexual options, such as bisexuality or transsexuality, fall far beyond the boundaries of youngsters raised in religious milieus, whether Islamic, fundamentalist Protestant or conservative Catholic. More examples doubtlessly can be given but, in their turn, fall beyond our cultural knowledge.

Why the existing sites are not used by the target group

We believe that credibility, identification and acceptance by the target group can only be achieved by involving them directly. Before building sites like these, you need to carefully investigate the intended user groups, preferably in a participative format. Open interviews, at the start of the project, made clear that existing web sites are deemed especially awful because they use direct language and closed narratives. Words such as 'prick', 'cunt', 'fuck' and so on are better avoided. This is not how Dutch Muslim youth talk about sex. A penis you call a 'thing'. Genital organs are never named, "Down there" will do fine. In life stories a blow job is described as follows: "He put his 'thing' in my mouth and made me ... you know what I mean."[viii]

A description of having sex ends with: "I was thinking about what... you know, what we were 'doing' ..., d'y understand?"[ix] Likewise, street language, spelling mistakes, Moroccan and Turkish words are used throughout the life story texts, as they were in the interviews and on www.marokko.nl, the 'mother' community website.

During the process of building the site—the technical part of which was in the hands of Marokko Media, the sites' publishers—a respectful and sensitive contact with the target group was maintained. Coming from a position of friendliness and respect it is possible to find ways to check constantly if the translation of your knowledge (or interpretation of knowledge and values) of the intended audience, their beliefs and cultural sensitivity is correct. Contrary to how the existing websites were built, we chose a form of cooperation with the target group: participative design. The young Turkish and Moroccan-Dutch people we wanted to reach had to become more than a target group who provide necessary information. They needed to become a partner and eventually a co-owner. The building of this sex education website became a bottom-up activity, close to 'user-generated' media practice. As Hartley (2009, chapter 11 in Lundby) claims, the form of digital storytelling we used has democratic potential in that the basis was laid by amateurs and not by media professionals. Participative design in combination with digital storytelling we hoped would provide for authenticity, recognition and identification.

Research technique: how we approached the building of the site

Formally in participative design prospective users can be consulted at any stage of development. Ideally, they are a partner in a project right from the start. While we needed to find young Turkish and Moroccan Dutch representatives to be our partners, we decided that we would not probably

have the best means to access these groups directly, three middle-aged white women that we are. We do have access to our students, whom we decided to involve and, via Marokko Media again, there is a group that we could ask to help us. In this way we organized a team of interviewers (INHolland students, both white and of mixed backgrounds, all familiar with functioning in multicultural groups), and an editorial team (consisting of active Marokko.nl members, the community that is the 'mother' website and host to the sex education 'sub' site).

Our students interviewed over 50 Turkish and Moroccan youngsters about issues to do with sex. The life stories on the web site are based on analysis of these interviews. The students were grouped around a 'head writer' who shared either the Turkish or the Moroccan background needed for the particular sub web site. We hoped in this way to create more support and acceptance amongst the intended group of users. As a group the students learned about understanding and translating cultural knowledge. They became 'cultural mediators', able to transform potentially sensitive information and issues into acceptable language and narratives. They learned to tell the stories of the groups they had interviewed. While this is perhaps a more manipulative form of digital storytelling and one that is slightly farther removed from direct self-representation than in other examples, we feel that the overlap in age and life experience between our students and their interviewees forged a bond. As in other digital storytelling projects, especially ones that recount the history of a specific region or place, there should be room for a storyteller to create a 'stronger' or 'better' version of real life. Given that the life stories were critically looked at and edited by the editorial committee, consisting entirely of Marokko.nl community members, we can vouch for the method used as truly participative and 'true' to how the young people the site was built for understand their lives. Below we will add a last layer to the process of validation of the project. That is, the life stories were open to comments by the web community, a possibility that was much used. As stories unfolded over a series of installments, these comments were a valuable means to fine tune content.

So, who were these students? We decided to ask students in a teaching module called Images and Audiences to do the interviews amongst the prospective users of the website. All 31 are third and fourth year students at INHolland. They were trained in qualitative interview techniques and in creative writing techniques in a web-context.

The central issue of the interviews was sexuality. First the students had interview training in the classroom supervised by a trainer. Talking about sex in a classroom was definitely something new. Some discovered they didn't want to openly talk about sex and found out later this was somehow similar to the target group's attitude. We discussed whether there were other ways to get the information we needed, in a possibly more respectful way. One solution was to ask respondents about their sister's or brother's attitude towards sex, which proved to work well.

The students were close to the groups we wanted the websites to reach. Many of them have Moroccan and Turkish friends and acquaintances in their networks. They interviewed 41 Moroccan and 21 Turkish young men and women, aged 15−25, about their thoughts, opinions and experiences to do with sex and sex education. It became clear that in practice a lot of them are sexually active, even though decisions were not always taken consciously. They experienced a range of conflicting feelings and emotions, especially in relation to religion.

The focus of the interviews was on the dilemmas they experience and the choices they made when looking for information in relation to important choices such as whether or not to have sex before marriage. All this real life

information about sex, sexual advice and education and Islam was used in building the sex-education sub-websites of the internet community's marokko.nl and hababam.nl, mostly visited by Moroccan and Turkish people aged 15-25. 'No taboos' became their name: www.geentaboes.marokko.nl and www.geentaboes.hababam.nl.[x] Interestingly, there are quite a few taboos in these web pages, as the interviews had made clear that direct language was a clear no-no. An example from an interview:

> Informant: Well, you can't just discuss sexuality with Moroccan or Turkish people. Not as an outsider. You have to be careful, understand? You can talk with me about this but I am not saying that much. Just, you have to be careful with what you say. What it's all about. It's best to circle a bit. Of course you can pose a normal question but step by step, you understand. Small steps will get you in the right direction.

Life stories

Based on the outcome of the interviews, students adapted the information and wrote 8 authentic and credible life stories with Turkish and Moroccan characters about their difficulties, dilemmas and choices about being in love, what partner they would like to choose, homosexuality, sexual abuse, getting pregnant, getting an STD, adultery and so on. This reflects the range of sexuality-related topics referred to in the interviews. Incest, sadomasochism, transsexuality are part of a nether world of unmentionables. We have no indication whether these issues are simply unnamable or entirely part of a different world. Given the intention to develop the sex education websites in participatory design, we did not pressure the student-interviewers to move even further out of their own or their informants' comfort zones.

In the life stories the characters recount how they experience events around difficult but namable topics, what their doubts are, what dilemmas they face, what choices they make. The stories have open endings, in order to elicit reactions from the website visitors (whom we hoped would coincide with our intended audience). Links are put in the stories to encourage users to gather information about specific topics themselves on specialized sites and to get them to discuss with each other in a forum. Again, the technical work was done by Marokko.nl. Link options were provided by the Rutgers Nisso Group.

What kind of material did the student-narrators have, after transcribing and analyzing the interview material? A few particularly apt and exemplary excerpts from the interview transcripts that were adapted into the life stories follow below. [xi]

In the life story entitled 'My forgotten past' the protagonist Rayan (a woman) discusses sex and pregnancy before marriage. Quotations from the interviews adapted in the story: 'My forgotten past':

> Interview with Miriam: My brother is 25 years old and they feel like it should all be left to school. The lessons they get in school. In biology and all that. But, for example, menstruation and things like that; they have been explained to us. That is what every mother should do for her daughter but sex talk ..... No, that is unthinkable. That doesn't happen with us. Not in our family, that is really a taboo (laughs).
> Interview with Miriam: Being in love doesn't automatically mean that you will have sex! There are Moroccan girls that do ... but ... it is really how you are raised, at home... because, really, sex before marriage is strictly forbidden in Islam .... With us.
>
> Interview with Adha: You are not..., you are a Muslim... well, not very actively, but sex before marriage, how do you think about that? Adha:

Well, it's a good thing for girls but for boys less so. Boys have their needs and, just suppose, this boy meets a Moroccan girl and he wants to make love with her and she says: I can't, I have to stick to the rules. Won't that boy go and leave her? She is not going to like that.

Interview with Miryam, Amina and Naomi: Is it worse in the Moroccan community to get a divorce or to have sex before you are married? Miryam: Sex before marriage is worse. Amina: Hmmmm, enough already! (Laughs). We had a girl in our class, she was called Naomi. She was fifteen at that point, I think, and when she was sixteen she had a baby. That was something. Like: how could that happen?! And she knew, we talked about it. She knows she can get pregnant and still it happens. Too tempting. This person you are seeing, that is also important. That might have been a factor. To experience all of this up close, well, it makes you think twice. Makes you think: better be careful. You don't want to become someone like that, you know.

In the life story entitled 'A different existence' the protagonist Omar (a man) discusses homosexuality. Quotations that have been used for creating this life story:

Merihban: No, I don't think you are born like that, come on. No one is born gay. It is a choice you make, no? Interviewer: That's the question, is it really a choice? Merihban: Nah I think it is.

Interviewer: So women accept it, but your brothers, your father? Merihban: My father and my brothers they think it is really, well, death penalty really.

Warda: Well, it immediately puts an entire family to shame. Like: you have a homo in your family, you know.

Ibrahim: Look, if my son turned out to be gay, I would consider that an immense shame to myself. And I would want to say to him: get out of here. I wouldn't want to see him ever again. It's because of respect, I guess.

Bayram: It is to do with sex parts (laughter). Sex parts, yes. God made us into a man and a woman, a girl and a boy. Why would we want to be with someone who has the same sex parts, rather than have sex with someone who has the opposite part that was specially made for us? (But...) Yes, what it has been made for especially. We are equal you know but this, you have to respect it.

In the life story entitled 'Torn apart by love' the protagonist Samira, a woman, discusses being a lesbian in a Muslim community. Quotations used from the interview material mostly concern the lack of sound knowledge about sexuality, the reliance on female family members and prejudiced concerns. It must be quite difficult to arrive at a sexuality that is your own under those circumstances. We were given to understand that topics such as homosexuality cannot be tied directly to our main characters. That is definitely too delicate a matter and a taboo in Moroccan and Turkish culture. No one, our informants said, would dare to read about a homosexual's experiences. These are hot issues though. We found out that we could write about this subject by removing the 'problem' one step from the protagonist. The character does not tell his or her own story but the story of a homosexual school mate or friend. This was an acceptable choice and allowed for homosexuality to be debatable. 'Torn apart' uses this technique and was based on the following interview excerpts, among others.

Miryam: I don't know. I don't like the pill. I am always afraid, I think it will damage my uterus or something. I am simply afraid that I will never be able to have children. So that's why I don't take it.

Anonymous: I am not going to say I'll never have a relationship. But I would really prefer to do it the Islamic way, however difficult that may sound. But that is what I am going to try.

Anis: I think they'll explain in such a way that it falls within the bounds of Islam, that it's respectful, that it isn't harmful to the Faith. And that people will be able to read those texts and when they do, when they hear them, that is will be done in the right way. No cursing or swear words, you understand. There are plenty ways to make clear what you mean. It doesn't always have to do: fucking is forbidden, having sex is not allowed. You can turn it into a story. What they say in Islam: fitna. Fitna means 'to do bad things'. That's a good way to make things clear. There are plenty of ways to make things clear; it just needs the right intentions. If a site just launches music and the newest songs Aekon, Ali B, then I don't think you'll make much progress in reaching young people when it comes to Islam.

Esma: Yeah, I knew it of course and I did have sex with my boy friend without a condom, but I didn't … I knew we should have, but he did not have it with him and neither had I. And we wanted really to do it. So it happened. We were Lucky I guess, because I am not on the pill. If I were to come home with that…, no that is out of the question.

Chahida: No… I never had any sex education. But I do have older sisters, fortunately. My eldest sister is 40. So, if there is something that I want to know about or…. We just talk about it.

Warda: Lots of girls don't use tampons. They are afraid it will deflower them. Everybody knows that the hymen is just this tiny ridge but they continue to think it is a real web, like skin, that has to be broken through. After you get engaged, you get married and then in your wedding night you bring a white piece of cloth and it has to bleed when you have sex. But if you happen to have a bigger one, it won't bleed (laughs). So what girls do is stick themselves in their finger or cheek in order to have blood on their piece of cloth.

Learning a new 'cultural language'

The end result of interviewing, writing and editing stories, and offering them to the web community amounts to what Marcus and Fisher (1983) called a polylogue. Neither the voice of the researcher/author nor the voice of the interviewer/students is allowed to dominate in the final product. There is, moreover, hardly a 'final' product. The websites continue to draw visitors who, among themselves, discuss how gross or exciting it is that sex is talked about in a new register. The editorial team too continues to advise Marokko Media, publisher of the websites, on how and whether to moderate discussions, remove or add new stories. As a storytelling project should, the website project moves beyond monologue and dialogue. It was able to do so because we learned to speak a new language and develop narrative strategies we normally would not choose to use.

Being in constant negotiation with the target group we developed a 'new' narrative strategy: creating credibility adapting themes from the interviews,

using a special tone of voice , the use of veiled languages, and by constantly asking feedback from the redaction team we learned a whole new 'cultural language'. We learned that direct address is not done and feels offensive to the Turkish and Moroccan Dutch communities. Language moreover has to be veiled. Narratives need to circle round their actual topic, and body parts, especially sexual parts, need to be described as 'thing' or at most 'down there'.

There is a third thing we learned. Both the ethnic communities we wanted to invite to the sex education websites prefer melodrama to realism. We chose to instruct our student-writers to aim for 'emotional realism' (the term is borrowed from Ien Ang's soap opera study, 1985). Stories need to be open to identification, story lines use triumph over tragedy or just the misery of tragedy to make their point. This allows for the 'tragic choice' as a device, which is highly useful in talking about sex and religion. Martha Nussbaum (1987) suggests that Greek drama provides the best examples of making impossible choices. Its power as a performance art is surely due to giving full rein to outing these conflicting emotions and the sense that there is no way to win.

While at the outset we would have felt very uncomfortable allowing for distancing and veiled language and modes of address, we can see that this, at the very least, is an effective strategy in that it does not alienate those we want to visit and use the websites. The choice of topics and the hyperlinks provided in the stories assuage a feminist sense that naming things as they are is the more effective political strategy. Useless here, as it turned out, but hidden away in the structure of the participative designed project.
Participative design and the options open in digital fora meant that there was ample room for authorship from both communities and a sense of ownership that otherwise would have been difficult to realize. From the names of characters to the expressions used, the sites can be used as familiar, easy conversation and surroundings. While this may be unduly self-congratulatory, we feel that it is the use of the right tone of voice, as well as the look and feel of the sites, that has made this sense of co-ownership possible, which in turn is now extending further and further into co-creation of a safe and honest space for sex education.

All in all, this is hardly sex education. To educate can be a formal and patronizing process, involving an overload of morals (possibly of the wrong kind). The no-taboo websites are informative, though. While they avoid moralization and a patronizing tone, they do offer a light touch, sometimes a little humor and overall a range of options and possibilities for those who want to know more about things they feel they cannot even name outright. Analyzing the material, we chose to understand the cultural repertoires that organize knowledge of the world for our two groups of young people. We mapped sensitivities and reproduced interpretive frames offered by informants in the interviews.

We looked for authenticity and credibility, but did we succeed? Not only is the editorial team still active, we also had a student do a follow up evaluation study of how the no-taboo websites are actually used. We were happy to learn that some of the visitors commenting on the stories liked them:

> Merhaba, it is as if you have experienced it yourself (man commenting on story, marokko.nl).

> Damn, really typical Turkish (woman, hababam.nl).

The use of relevant and cultural semantics of the target audience was very important to gain credibility. Again on hababam (for the Turkish-Dutch) community this was managed successfully, mostly.

> It's my feeling that the story has a sort of sarcastic double layer (which I will not discuss here). Curious about the rest PS: I hardly ever read stories on hababam, but this one's really got something. My compliments (female, hababam.nl).

> This is really well-written. Compared with most of the stories here, the use of language is also very good (and NOT half Turkish street language and then half Dutch street language (female, hababam.nl).

Benefits and disadvantages of the method used

One of the greatest benefits of participative design is that the target group gained a voice. Through participative design, we managed to build credibility, offer support and gain acceptance amongst those we wanted to reach. There are disadvantages too. It is a time-intensive method, and the quality of negotiation always depends on the negotiators. We were lucky to have our multicultural aware students at hand. Without them, it would have been far more difficult to achieve the current level of authenticity in the stories.

The life stories were well received. They are posted in installments in order to get web site users to return to the site. Visitors could offer their views on these installments as they appeared. Most of the reactions were positive, and came from women.

> Female: Beautiful story go onnnn!!!

> Female: My dearest, you really have to go on...

> Female: Super story, devamini beklyorum.

This suggests that digital storytelling in this regard may have been a stronger communication tool to use for young women than for young men. Then again, we know from the interview material that young women talk more easily about sex, e.g. with family members.

We also chose to have the live stories presented as written by female avatars called Zonnetje87 (sunny87, Moroccan) and Denizje (Turkish woman's name). Their cover identity suggests they wrote these stories for the website as part of a school assignment. The assignment included interviews. They were of course written by our students (in that respect we stayed fairly close to the actual truth). Regardless of the cover story and repeated reminders, the stories are experienced as real stories. Repeatedly 'Sunny87' and 'Denizje" remind the website users of the fact that the stories although based on real life, are fictional and not about them themselves:

> Hi there everybody, as I explained earlier to my other stories, the reason why my stories are toppers is because I wrote them for a site that gives sex education to people with our background. This site, http://www.geentaboes.marokko.nl is actually put up by us youngsters, and I also have based my stories on real interviews with Moroccan girls and boys. So, once again, these stories are NOT about my own life. This story is quite intense, when I interviewed this boy, that was really difficult.[xii]

Obviously, Mediterranean narrative culture, to use an impossibly broad generalization, leans towards the tragic and the dramatic. Such stories, as we noted above, lend themselves particularly well to 'emotional realism'. That is to say, even though readers realize that this is fiction, they perceive these stories as 'true' in an emotional sense. The life stories do offer emotional

realism, but the reader needs to have a melodramatic imagination at one's disposal (Ang 1985). The readers allow the fiction to speak to real life situations they have experienced or that they imagine they could find themselves in. Again, it is women who master the art of emotional learning through exaggerated fictional examples much better than men.

Conclusion and discussion

After the soft launch in June 2009 it very soon became clear that the site provided much needed real life examples and information. Within one week these sites were visited over 2000 times, while more than 22 500 pages were consulted. The average visiting time was 7 minutes, in which the themes of virginity, Islam, sexuality, relationships and the female body were viewed most frequently. The life stories are also popular. Visitors want to know what happens next. After the official start of the campaign, end of September 2009, the sites had 800 visitors per day. So far, reactions are mainly positive to very positive, quite a feat given that technically the sites certainly had a number of irritating technical glitches. Some of these have since been rectified.

After the sub-websites were launched we asked one of our students to monitor the reactions and to investigate how the combined site (geentaboes.nl) works. Her results show that its young users feel that important issues are foregrounded in the right way. The lack of continuity and interaction around the life stories they feel is a shame. Regretfully we do not have the means to have students write new installments. Another conclusion of the evaluation was that some visitors feel free to use rude language because one can remain anonymous when visiting the site. While the target group feels free to write openly about sexuality, it is striking how much aggressive and discriminating language is also used (final dissertation Diane Visser, page 4-5). It strengthens us in our belief that both young women and young men use the site, be it in rather different communicative modes.

Turkish-Dutch and Moroccan-Dutch youngsters tend to be very active on Dutch-language Turkish and Moroccan forum sites (cf. Nijntjes, W, 2006, 'The meaning of virtual forum discussions to the identity forming of Moroccan-Dutch youngsters', page 2) . On these discussion sites geentaboes.nl was received well, especially the life stories. Attractive parts of the life stories were copied and linked back to geentaboes.nl. Here too we find mostly positive comments:

Female: Beautiful story go onnnn!!!

Female: My dearest, you really have to go on.

Female: Super story, devamini beklyorum.

Male: Bonggg this is really good... it keeps on being exciting..

please go on x

"too bad too bad this is happening in our culture…"

Again, women react far more often than men. As far as we can tell, men do visit the site, but they only read and do not contribute. When they do react it is mostly in a negative vein:

Male: If only you could stop.

> Male: A3lian, kuffar, beautiful sex stories... please keep on going fast, because we love kuffars that talk openly about sex. See you in hell....

Which is not to say that all reactions from women are positive:

> Female: These stories are all made up and don't come telling me that it's not true.

> Female: excuse me, but I start to get sick of these typical stories, it's homo, or it's lesbo, or deflowering, bladibla...

While clearly a success, there are a number of issues that require further reflection and investigation. How to reach and actively make young men commit to a project such as this is one of them. For ourselves we feel that we have learned to take up a different role as investigators/educators. While also involving our analytic skills, we mainly needed to learn how to facilitate. Again, that is a position that requires the giving up of control. Especially here that was not always easy to do. Strong moral beliefs on either side of the divide between us older women and 'them' ethnic minority group youngsters require far more negotiation than we had room for here. While we have seen that respect is not just a moral prerequisite but also a practical necessity, we draw the line at bowing to discrimination, racial and other slurs. Digital storytelling offers great possibilities. But they will be difficult and occasionally painful to realize.

We wanted to know: 'How can we build a sex education website that fits better than the available websites with the needs and the experiences of Moroccan and Turkish-Dutch youngsters aged 15 – 25?' According to the visitor numbers (traffic) and activity on both sub-websites, we succeeded in doing so by making the life worlds of these young people our central concern. Moreover, we ceded control of the content and allowed (other) young people to act as mediators and storytellers. The intended audience was represented in an editorial team that had veto power over story lines and characters. Reactions during the test phase were taken very seriously. We allowed our own outspoken views about sexuality and sex education to remain in the background, while veiled and indirect language, as decreed by our informants, was used. We made room for an authentic religion-friendly space to learn about and discuss sex. While we feel that we used (a version of) digital storytelling, this is debatable. Perhaps we should think of this partially mediated form, as 'digital storytelling light'. Without our students, acting as cultural mediators, we would have been nowhere. We thank them for their work, their courage and their creativity.

References

Ang, I. (1985). *Watching Dallas. Soap opera and the melodramatic imagination*. London: Methuen.

Feenberg, A. & Barney, D. (2004). *Community in the Digital Age, Philosophy and Practice*, Bowman & Littlefield 2004.

Flax, J. (1987). "Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory," *Signs* 12,4 (Summer 1987).

Gauntlett, David (2007). *Creative explorations. New approaches to identities and audiences*. London: Routledge.

Hartley, John (2008). "Problems of expertise and scalability in self-made media". In: Lundby, Knut (Ed.): *Digital storytelling, mediatized stories: self-representations in new media*. Digital Formations, 52. Peter Lang, New York, pp. 197-211.

Johnson, G. & Ambrose, P. (2006). Neo-tribes: The power and potential of online communities in health care. In *Communications of the ACM* vol. 49(1), pp. 107-113. .

Lambert, J. (2002). *Digital storytelling: Capturing lives, creating community*. Berkeley, CA: Digital Diner Press.

Lundby, Knut (ed.) *Digital Storytelling, Mediatized Stories, Self-representation in New Media*. Peter Lang, New York.

Marcus, G. E. & Fischer, M. J. M. (1996). *Anthropology as Cultural Critique. An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*. 2d edition. Chicago: University of Chicago press.

McWilliams, K. & Hartley, J. (2009). *Story circle. Digital Storytelling Around the World*. Wiley-Blackwell, Malden, MA.

Nijntjes , W, (2006). 'The meaning of virtual forum discussions to the identity forming of Moroccan-Dutch youngsters'. Unpublished master's thesis, VU University, Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

Noble, A. & C. Robinson (2000). 'For the love of the people: Participatory design in a community context', in *Proceeding of Co Designing*, 2000, Springer: London.

Nussbaum, Martha (1986). *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

Said, Edward (2003). *Orientalism*. Londen (etc.): Penguin Books, originally published in 1978.

Schuler, D. & A. Namioka (Eds.) (1993). *Participatory Design. Principles and Practices*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., Publishers: Hillsdale, New Jersey.

Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of Qualitative Research. Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*. Newbury Park: Sage.

Visser, Diane (2010). *geentaboes.nl*, final BA dissertation, School of Communication, INHolland University, Amsterdam/Diemen.

Websites

http://seksuele_vorming.yurls.net

http://www.ggdgezondheidsinfo.nl/dossiers.asp?regioid=7&dossierid=230

http://www.studieinfo.nl/sexuelevoorlichting/index.html

www.allesovergay.nl

www.hababam.nl

www.Kitatin.com (Antilian)

www.Lokum.nl (Turkish)

www.Maroc.nl (Moroccan)

www.marokko.nl

www.Safesex.nl

www.YouXme.nl (Turkish and Moroccan)

---

[i] www.YouXme.nl; Turkish and Moroccan; Lokum.nl (Turkish); Maroc.nl (Moroccan); hulpmix.nl (different cultural backgrounds). Consulted on 17 December 2009.

[ii] Final dissertation Diana Visser, page 12. Consulted on 23 January 2010.

[iii] NRC Handelsblad, 19 January 2010; Volkskrant 18 January 2010, 2009; Elsevier 14 August 2007, consulted on 22 January 2010.

[iv] http://www.volkskrant.nl article 1078620.ece/ Talking about sex under migrants still taboo, consulted on December19, 2009.

[v] Dami A. (2003) "Couscous met appelmoes", dialogue with Moroccans, page 62.

[vi] NRCHandelsblad February 12, 2009, consulted online January 22, 2010.

[vii] NRCHandelsblad February 12, 2009, consulted online January 22, 2010.

[viii] Life story Rajan, www.geentaboes.marokko.nl

[ix] Life story Umit www.geentaboes.hababam.nl

[x] 'geen taboes' means: no taboos.

[xi] Life stories at www.geentaboes.marokko.nl, www.geentaboes.hababam.nl and transcriptions of interviews, digital database Lecturer. Retrieved January 20, 2010.

[xii] Retrieved from
http://www.geentaboes.marokko.nl/index.php?nav=verhalen&verhaal=2828906