

# THE 2024 SRHR IMPLEMENTATION STORIES

## **The Safe Love Project: Leveraging Dating Apps as a Tool to Ignite Essential Conversations About Sexual Health**

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# BACKGROUND

Ensuring equity in access to sexual and reproductive health (SRH), strengthening new and existing partnerships, and fostering resilience and innovation in health systems is vital for expanding comprehensive SRH access and addressing diverse population needs. To support projects in achieving these goals, the USAID-funded Knowledge SUCCESS project, in collaboration with the WHO/IBP Network, published a series of program implementation stories that showcase implementers who have successfully navigated these complexities to deliver impactful outcomes.

***This story on the Safe Love project is one of three implementation stories selected for the 2024 series.***

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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# THE SAFE LOVE PROJECT

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*Safe love*



# INTRODUCTION

In a digital age where dating apps have become a central part of young people's social lives, the **Safe Love project** seized an innovative opportunity to transform these platforms into a tool for sexual and reproductive health (SRH) education. The program, led by the Centre for Catalyzing Change (C3) in India in partnership with the Truly Madly dating app and funded by the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, aimed to provide information on safer sex, including contraceptive methods and prevention of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), to young people between the ages of 18-30 years through a fun, easy-to-understand, non-judgmental, and pleasure-affirming approach that empowers young people to make informed choices regarding their sexual and reproductive well-being.

In 2017, data showed that 52% of unmarried Indians aged 25-34 were active on dating apps. Since then, young Indians have become one of the largest markets of dating app users globally. Recognizing the significant reach of these platforms, C3 launched the Safe Love project in response to the Packard Foundation's 2018 Quality Innovation Challenge (QIC). The C3 team saw that dating apps were more than just spaces for connection—they were also untapped channels to deliver essential SRH information directly to the screens of young Indians.

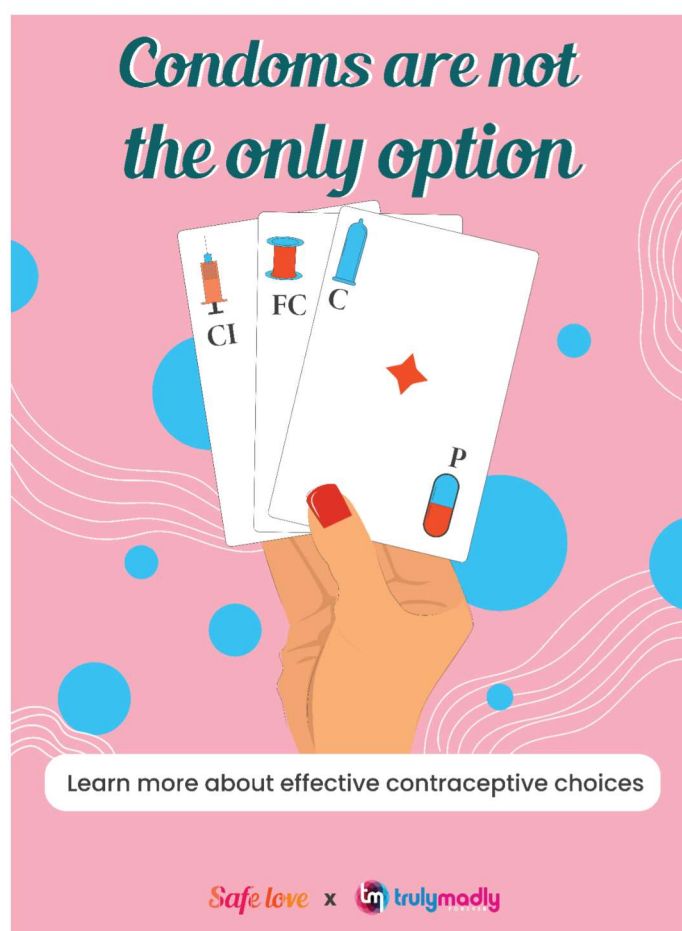
Despite the widespread use of these apps, data from the National Family Health Surveys in India highlighted a critical gap: young people's knowledge about STIs, modern contraceptives, and the principles of consent and bodily autonomy remained alarmingly low. This realization became the driving force behind Safe Love's mission to empower a generation with the knowledge needed to make informed SRH choices.

**“Unlike other social media apps that youth use, there is a captive audience on dating apps that already have the intention of some kind of sexual engagement. That’s why dating apps are an ideal platform for us to disseminate this kind of [SRH] information.”**

*– Varuni Narang, Senior Program Officer, C3*

Awarded in 2019, and originally supported as a one-year initiative through its QIC funding, Safe Love's positive early reception secured it additional funding to operate through 2022. Recognizing the potential of dating apps as a platform to reach a younger population with essential SRH information, C3 began a partnership with TrulyMadly, a homegrown Indian dating app that had over 9 million subscribers in 2020, as well as a reputation for focusing on women's safety in their app design.

Unlike mainstream international dating apps, TrulyMadly had a significant audience in smaller cities and semi-urban areas in India where the awareness gaps around SRH were more pronounced, allowing the project to effectively reach a more diverse pool of young people in the country. As a result, the content for Safe Love was tailored specifically for this audience, blending local languages with English and incorporating vernacular and lingo familiar to semi-urban Indian youth.



*The cover photo of a sponsored profile on the TrulyMadly app that directed app users to long-form Safe Love articles about sexual and reproductive health.*

As the project began its roll-out in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic brought an unexpected surge in dating app usage, with users spending more time on these platforms due to lockdowns. And because most of these users were not paying for premium versions of their apps, they were regularly exposed to ads, which the Safe Love team recognized as a powerful space to deliver critical SRH educational content. Initially focusing on safer sex practices, the project soon expanded to topics like virtual dating etiquette, online consent, and digital safety to reflect the shift to online interactions. By staying responsive to users' evolving needs, Safe Love kept its messaging relevant. Even as lockdowns eased and in-person interactions resumed, the program's adaptability ensured they could continue sharing relevant messaging to deliver impactful health education to the diverse, engaged audience using the app.

## Get to Know the Safe Love Program Model

Safe Love's content was intentionally crafted by young creators, designers, and developers to resonate with its audience, ensuring it spoke directly to young people's experiences and concerns. This commitment to using a language—frequently Hinglish—and tone that felt familiar and relatable was essential in building trust with their audience. The content was crafted to be easy to understand, relatable, and pleasure-affirming, moving away from a preachy tone to one that was conversational and engaging.

**As C3 Senior Program Officer, Varuni Narang, put it:**

*"We wanted to speak to young people in a language that they already speak. Which means, not telling users 'Hey, did you know that this STI exists?' Instead, it [the app] would say things like, 'So last night you matched with someone, but how are you going to talk about their sexual history?' and we would include quizzes and tools to help facilitate that conversation."*



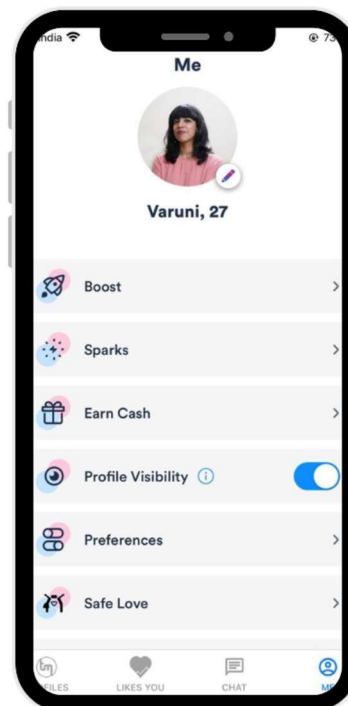
### **The Pleasure Principles: Global SRH Guidelines in Action**

Did you know that new research from the WHO has shown that using a pleasure-based approach to sexual health education can actually lead to improved sexual health outcomes? Learn more about this framework in the world's first guidelines to pleasure-based sexual health: the Pleasure Principles.

By embracing pleasure-positive messaging and supporting sex positivity, inclusivity, and body positivity, the Safe Love program creates a non-judgmental, engaging environment that empowers young people to make informed, positive choices about their sexual health.

Within the app, important topics on sexual health were integrated into the user experience through fun and interactive features like in-chat stickers, ice-breaker doodles, and compatibility quizzes that helped gently introduce topics like safety, body positivity, and respectful communication. The Safe Love stickers were even highlighted in a TrulyMadly promotional video on social media, demonstrating how these tools could facilitate discussions about sexual health and consent between dating partners.

Additionally, a permanent Safe Love button within the app's user menu was included to direct users to a Safe Love website filled with longer-form articles, FAQs, and quizzes on a wide range of SRH topics. By embedding these elements directly into the app, Safe Love helped users make informed SRH decisions without feeling like they were being targeted by an external campaign.



*The TrulyMadly app included a permanent “Safe Love” button that directed users to the Safe Love website, which hosted long-form articles and FAQs on various SRH topics.*

## Data-Driven Content Adaptations

When selecting TrulyMadly as the dating app partner for implementation, the Safe Love project valued the proven experience of TrulyMadly's design team in creating, launching, and scaling prior successful apps. This expertise was evident in their support for effective pilot testing and scaling up the Safe Love app features. By integrating these iterative processes into the design of Safe Love features on the TrulyMadly app, the two teams could monitor user engagement and adjust the content based on real-time data insights, ensuring that the material remained relevant and effective.

Because understanding the needs and preferences of the app's user base was crucial to Safe Love's success, the team developed and conducted in-app surveys with over 2,000 TrulyMadly users to better understand how to tailor its content. ***The surveys revealed key insights, including:***

- 50% of users were not confident in discussing sex with new partners
- Over 60% did not understand consent
- 30% rarely or never insisted on using protection
- 50% feared being judged if they disclosed a sexual infection
- 60% wanted their dating app to provide information on safer sex

These findings directly shaped the Safe Love content, helping the team tailor the material to the real, expressed needs of the young people using the platform.



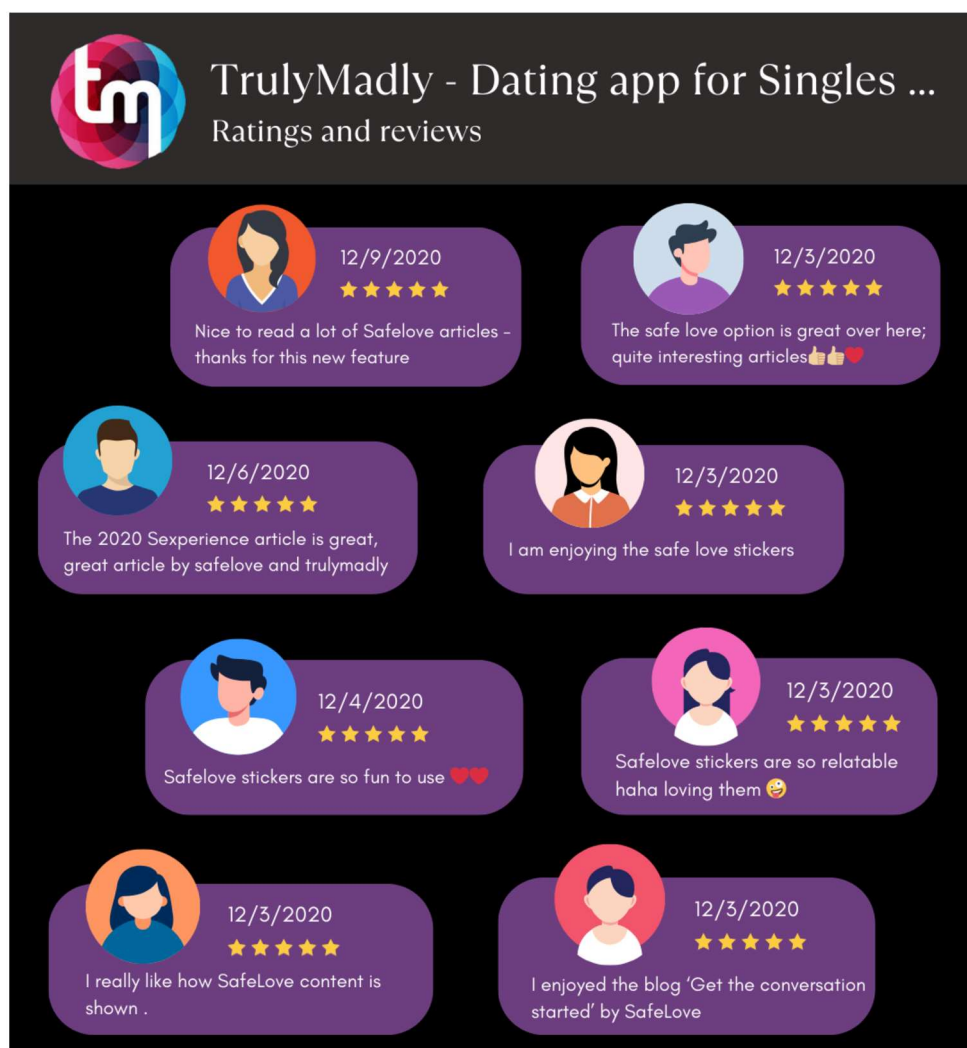
*In-App chat stickers were used in the TrulyMadly app as ice breakers to initiate and normalize conversations on safer sex.*



# Program Impact

## Measuring Success

Given the transient nature of dating app users, the Safe Love project focused on user engagement metrics in the app to gauge success rather than traditional pre- and post-test surveys. This approach allowed the project team to continuously adapt and optimize content based on real-time user interactions, ensuring that the SRH information remained relevant and compelling. Although the rolling audience presented challenges for measuring long-term behavior change, it did provide a unique advantage in allowing Safe Love to consistently reach fresh and diverse groups of young people each month.



*TrulyMadly user reviews in the Google Playstore that reference use of the app's Safe Love educational content. (Anonymized for user privacy.)*

## Impact and Engagement

Over the project's duration, Safe Love helped bring SRH conversations further into the mainstream, reaching a diverse and dynamic audience that typically lacks access to accurate, judgment-free sexual health information. With approximately 500,000 active users on the TrulyMadly app each month, the project reached the following engagement metrics over its first two years:

- The Safe Love sidebar in the app received 103,112 hits
- The educational website linked to from the sidebar accumulated 600,528 views, introducing users to topics on safe sex, consent, and sexual health
- The in-app compatibility quizzes were played 44,038 times
- The in-app chat stickers were shared between users 28,954 times
- The Sponsored Profile, which provided detailed information on safer sex practices, garnered 226,416 clicks

This high level of engagement, coupled with positive app store reviews, demonstrated the project's value to users and ultimately led TrulyMadly to take official ownership over Safe Love, including permanently integrating its content into their main website and platform. As a result, TrulyMadly became the first dating app in India to actively promote safer sex information, marking a significant milestone toward the destigmatization of often taboo SRH topics.

## Amplifying Reach Through Influencers

To further extend the program's reach and impact, Safe Love also collaborated with local influencers. For instance, Dr. Cuterus (the online username of Dr. Tanaya Narendra), a medical doctor with a strong social media presence, used her platform to promote TrulyMadly and debunk myths about emergency contraception and virginity to her audience on Instagram. These influencers played a crucial role in connecting Safe Love with a wider audience, maximizing the program's impact.

## Strengthening Public-Private Partnerships

One of the major successes of the project was securing buy-in from a for-profit organization. Convincing a dating app partner like TrulyMadly that an initiative like Safe Love could positively impact their brand required careful thought and collaboration. As many NGO or community-based public health initiatives know, finding and building strong partnerships with the private sector can be a challenging learning curve that profoundly impacts the outcomes of a project.

Even after C3 forged the partnership with TrulyMadly and Safe Love content went live on the app, the team needed to demonstrate through significant reach and engagement metrics that the work they had jointly put into Safe Love was meeting a need in the market and that users were actively seeking information about safer sex practices. By showcasing that fun, engaging, non-judgmental, and informative content could make users feel valued and cared for, Safe Love illustrated how the app could position itself as socially responsible.

This approach paid off; through positive app reviews and high engagement, TrulyMadly eventually took full ownership of the initiative after two years, integrating Safe Love's content into its main platform, creating an updated brand language and logo for Safe Love, and continuing to produce new Safe Love content. Ultimately, it helped that from the beginning that it was always TrulyMadly's name on the Safe Love product (C3 never had its name or logo associated with the project).



*At the start, we told TrulyMadly that our intention is to give Safe Love to them, like 'let us help you test it out, pilot it, and see how it feels. If your users are responding to it, please take ownership of it.' We wanted Safe Love to look like the app's initiative, because that's where the user buy-in came from. If we had put our name on it anywhere, they would have been less likely to integrate it into their product long-term. And we also didn't want users to read the health information on the app and think it was coming from an NGO preaching to them.*



**- Rakhi Miglani, Senior Communication Specialist at C3**



# Addressing Common Barriers

Below is a summary of key challenges experienced over the course of the Safe Love project and how the project team addressed the challenges.

Challenges	How it was addressed
<b>COVID-19 Pandemic Impact:</b> The pandemic disrupted the initial design and implementation of the project, and lockdown changed the habits of dating app users.	<b>Adaptation and Flexibility:</b> By swiftly adapting to the changing landscape, the project expanded its content to cover online interactions, ensuring the messaging remained relevant and impactful. This flexibility allowed Safe Love to maintain engagement and effectively deliver health education even as user behaviors continued to evolve post-lockdown.
<b>Stigma and Discomfort:</b> Securing a suitable app partner was challenging due to stigma and reluctance to discuss sexual health.	<b>Enhancing Brand Credibility:</b> By framing safer sex content as fun, engaging, and non-judgmental, Safe Love worked with their partner to demonstrate how including these features could enhance the app's reputation as socially responsible, making users feel valued and cared for.
<b>Language and Cultural Relevance:</b> Initial content was not resonating with the audience and had lower engagement because it was written in a style that was too "intellectual" or academic; it didn't match the everyday lingo of the Hindi-English speaking audience.	<b>Content Adaptation:</b> To better connect with users, the team quickly simplified the language and made the content more visual and accessible, aligning it with the familiar terms and expressions of the key audience.

## Lessons Learned

### User-Centered Design

Safe Love's success was deeply rooted in its commitment to responsiveness to user feedback, particularly in the creation of content that was relatable, easy to understand, and engaging for the target audience. The use of Hinglish, interactive features like quizzes and stickers, and the focus on a pleasure-positive approach helped ensure that the messaging resonated with young people. This lesson underscores the importance of designing interventions that speak directly to the lived experiences and language of the intended users, making the content not only accessible but also appealing.

### Leveraging Established Platforms for Sustainability

For projects looking to avoid the high start-up costs of launching a digital platform and the limitations of time-bound grant funding, partnering with an established digital platform can be a strategic approach. By integrating your content into a platform that already has a strong user base, and ensuring that the partner takes full ownership of the initiative, the project can evolve from an external campaign into a valuable, integral app feature for users. When users see the intervention as beneficial to their experience, it becomes a selling point, enhancing the platform's appeal. This user feedback and buy-in encourages the partner to continue supporting and promoting the content, using it as a key marketing tool and increasing the likelihood of long-term sustainability after the initial funding ends.

## On the Path to Universal Health Coverage

Access to essential health information is a human right that is critical to achieving universal health coverage (UHC). It can help people make decisions that protect their health and well-being and can accelerate progress toward UHC and other health targets. Through the power of public-private partnerships, the Safe Love app is advancing progress toward this goal by reaching a new audience market that typically lacks access to accurate, judgment-free sexual health information and meeting them where they are.

# CONCLUSION

By delivering engaging content through the popular TrulyMadly platform, the Safe Love project has reached hundreds of thousands of young app users across India and encouraged informed conversations about sexual health between dating partners.

As TrulyMadly integrates Safe Love into its platform permanently, the project's journey is a powerful reminder that ***meaningful change often starts with thinking outside the box and meeting people where they are.***

## ***Interested in learning more about the Safe Love project?***

Reach out to Varuni Narang at [vnarang@c3india.org](mailto:vnarang@c3india.org) or Rohini Banerjee at [rbanerjee@c3india.org](mailto:rbanerjee@c3india.org) for additional information.



