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Speak my language! Using digital media to reach and engage adolescents on oral PrEP

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Background: South Africa launched oral pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) for HIV prevention in 2016. Various demand creation tactics were employed to reach different populations with positive behavior change concepts and key messages. Adolescents participated in youth dialogues, capacity building sessions and material testing. Their voices were strong and consistent: innovation and digital messaging is key! In response, the OPTIONS Consortium collaborated with the South African National Department of Health (NDOH) to develop two digital approaches to reach and engage adolescents on PrEP: the www.myprep.co.za website and PrEP4Youth public service announcements (PSAs).

Methods: The www.myprep.co.za website used Material Design principles to develop a content management system that translates printed information, education, and communication materials to an online format reflecting popular social media portals. The PrEP4Youth PSAs were produced with nationally recognized actresses from MTV Shuga: Down South. The website content and PSA scripts were developed and adapted with input from a nationally representative youth group. The website and PSAs were primarily disseminated through social media. The website was promoted using Google Ads, and the PSAs were promoted using boosted Facebook posts. Social media and Google analytics were used to measure the reach of these digital approaches.

Results: The website provides a digital PrEP roadmap for potential or current users, including eligibility self-assessment. Linkage to prevention services is supported by a location finder function on the website, and a team responding to private messages on social media. The PSAs use a “spoken word” poetry style and a blend of beautifully shot, honest, informative conversations to normalize

PrEP as an acceptable HIV prevention method. Common questions posed by adolescents on HIV testing, stigma, combination prevention, adherence, and side effect management are addressed in a quick, strong and empowered fashion.

The website had 15,053 unique users with 54,935 page views and 9.5% returning users between 4 December 2018 and 23 June 2019. Most users were ages 25-34 (46%) or 18-24 (14%), and 52% were female. Most users accessed the website using mobile phones (82%), while fewer used computer desktops (13%) and tablets (5%). 1,266 users accessed the location finder tool.

The first PSA teaser and full video, focused on HIV testing, were posted on 3 June and 5 June 2019 respectively. On Facebook, the teaser reached 38,415 people with 860 post clicks, 9,700 views and 95 reactions; the PSA reached 31,553 people with 1,717 post clicks, 10,000 views and 79 reactions (as of 14 June). On Twitter, the teaser had 872 impressions and 59 views; the PSA had 858 impressions and 100 views. Both www.myprep.co.za and the PSAs have received positive feedback through online engagement in the form of private messages, post engagement and positive commenting.

Conclusion: Social media analytics demonstrate that South African adolescents and young people can be reached and engaged at scale with PrEP messaging through digital platforms. The social media reach as seen on Facebook versus Twitter suggest that Facebook is still a preferred platform, and post boosting is successful at reaching targeted audiences.