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New research finds young people’s positive changes in behaviour are significantly linked to watching sex edutainment content by MTV Staying Alive Foundation

MTV Shuga series boosts uptake in new HIV prevention tools in South Africa; changes perceptions around gender-based violence in Nigeria

20 October 2021: London Two new research studies conducted by the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) in South Africa and Tulane University in Nigeria confirm the model of “edutainment”, pioneered by the MTV Staying Alive Foundation (MTV SAF) is promoting positive choices and helping young viewers to prevent HIV and early pregnancy.

The evaluation by the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) together with the Epicentre Health Research (South Africa), funded by Unitaid, found that MTV Shuga ‘Down South’ series can help young people to adopt new tools to prevent HIV, including self-testing and oral pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), a drug taken by HIV-negative people before and after sex that reduces the risk of getting HIV. Preliminary findings from South Africa show a strong and consistent link with HIV prevention behaviors: young people who engaged with the MTV Shuga series had twice the odds to know about HIV self-testing and PrEP, use an HIV self-test, and know their HIV status, compared to those who hadn’t wathced the show.

A study in Nigeria by Tulane University, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation which evaluated the MTV Shuga Naija series found similarly positive results, impacting attitudes towards gender-based violence, with victim-blaming decreasing significantly amongst both men and women. The research also showed that girls were more likely to open up to their parents about sexual violence after watching the show. Girls who viewed the show also expressed greater motivation to use contraception, feeling that using contraception is “easy,” and to actually use modern contraception.

Georgia Arnold, Executive Director, MTV SAF, said, “These results are fantastic news and further evidence that our model of edutainment works. For over a decade, MTV Shuga has proven adept at influencing young people’s behaviours through entertaining, immersive and challenging content, combined with relatable characters who audiences care deeply about. It is why we must continue investing in positive storytelling to improve public health.”

Dr Isolde Birdthistle, Associate Professor of Adolescent Health and Epidemiology at LSHTM, from the team who carried out the South Africa evaluation said, “This is an exciting time when the options for HIV prevention, including self-tests and PrEP, are growing, yet too few young people are aware of or have access to these tools. Our research showed that MTV Shuga is helping to expand the prevention choices for young people, by providing accurate and relevant information through engaging storylines. Many young people became aware of HIV self testing and PrEP for the first time through the series, and also helped to spread awareness among their peers, parents and partners.”
“MTV Shuga is driving real impact by demystifying and familiarizing viewers with the HIV self-testing process, empowering young people to know their HIV status and avoid infection,” said Robert Matiru, Director of Programmes at Unitaid. “It is putting a spotlight on young people’s real-life concerns and stimulating awareness of, and demand for, prevention and treatment services.”

The new studies complement earlier findings on MTV Staying Alive Foundation’s behaviour change work, including a study conducted by the World Bank Development Impact Evaluation (DIME) which suggest that for every $1 invested in the MTV Shuga series, there is a return in health and welfare benefits in the order of $150.

Monde Twala, MTV SAF Board member and Senior Vice President, ViacomCBS Africa said “It is inspiring to see the positive impact from the research back up the power of edutainment formats that reach into people’s hearts. The authentic and engaging content drives important behavioural change. With the pandemic placing intense strain on health services and people in lockdown for months, we have seen how MTV Shuga content and engagement is often a lifeline for young people. These are powerful collaborative platforms and I’m excited to see where MTV Shuga innovates next.”

During the pandemic the MTV Staying Alive Foundation showed its adaptability with new content specifically focused on COVID-19 under the MTV Shuga “Alone Together” series. MTV SAF implements a similar campaign in India, MTV Nishedh, with a second season currently in pre-production; and is looking to scale up work across sub-Saharan Africa, to include messaging on mental health, vaccine hesitancy, TB as well as sexual reproductive health messaging.

NOTE TO EDITORS

ABOUT LSHTM EVALUATION

Through a mixed methods evaluation of MTV Shuga’s multimedia edutainment campaign, the study found evidence consistent with a causal impact of the campaign on awareness, demand for and use of HIV self-testing and awareness of PrEP among young men and women equally in South Africa. A large online survey with 3,431 young people in South Africa found strong and consistent associations between these outcomes and exposure to the MTV Shuga Down South series. Frequency of the outcomes increased with greater exposure to the series, consistent with a dose response. The effect sizes were equally high for males and females, and stronger among adolescents (15-19 year olds) than adults aged 20-24 years. In-depth data generated from an embedded qualitative study revealed pathways by which MTV Shuga improved audience’s capacity and motivation to adopt HIV prevention, however, access to new tools like HIVST and PrEP remained limited.

ABOUT TULANE EVALUATION

Tulane and Boston University researchers used advanced statistical technical methods to evaluate the net effect of MTV Shuga Naija. Using data from three successive interviews with the same group of youth, the study found that 1) several indicators of youth sexual health and gender-based violence outcomes, such as confidence to use contraception and attitudes towards gender-based violence, improved more rapidly in areas that received Shuga Naija programming than in areas that did not, and 2) youth who reported hearing or
seeing Shuga Naija typically had better sexual health and gender-based outcomes, such as higher contraceptive use, than youth who were not exposed to Shuga Naija.

**ABOUT WORLD BANK EVALUATION of MTV Shuga Naija (Third season)**
The study by Banerjee, La Ferrara and Orozco-Olvera in 2019 was a cluster randomized control trial that collected baseline and follow-up surveys (n=4,986 individuals in 80 locations) to measure causal impacts 8-10 months after program exposure. The trial also collected objective measures for HIV testing, condom demand, and Chlamydia infections, a sexually transmitted infection common in study sites. The trial found clinical and statistical impacts on HIV knowledge, attitudes and behaviors. The study also found impacts to be larger for viewers that reported greater program-immersion and greater character-identification. The trial found that this TV series reshaped attitudes towards condoning domestic violence and reduced its incidence among viewers.

**ABOUT MTV STAYING ALIVE FOUNDATION AND MTV SHUGA**
The MTV Staying Alive Foundation is a media movement that believes in young people. We tell stories that are powered by the truth of young people’s experiences - stories that change lives. Pioneered in Nairobi, Kenya in 2009 MTV Shuga, is a long-running drama series and multimedia campaign that follows the lives of young people on the African continent. Aired on MTV channels around the world, the content is also offered rights-free to 3rd party broadcasters and content platforms, and used as a teaching aid by educators, healthcare workers and grassroots HIV/AIDS organisations around the world. Over eleven seasons, the drama has crossed the continent from Kenya to Nigeria and onto South Africa and touched on numerous plotlines relating to HIV and safe sex including HIV testing, stigma, living with HIV, mother to child transmission, transactional sex, gender-based violence, and condom use. It is broadcast globally on 164 broadcasters in 73 countries. [https://www.mtvstayingalive.org/](https://www.mtvstayingalive.org/)

**ABOUT LONDON SCHOOL OF HYGIENE & TROPICAL MEDICINE**
The London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) is a world-leading centre for research, postgraduate studies and continuing education in public and global health. LSHTM has a strong international presence with over 3,500 staff and 5,000 students working in the UK and countries around the world, and an annual research income of £180 million. LSHTM is one of the highest-rated research institutions in the UK, is partnered with two MRC University Units in The Gambia and Uganda, and was named University of the Year in the Times Higher Education Awards 2016. Our mission is to improve health and health equity in the UK and worldwide; working in partnership to achieve excellence in public and global health research, education and translation of knowledge into policy and practice. [www.lshtm.ac.uk](http://www.lshtm.ac.uk)

**ABOUT UNITAID**
Unitaid is a global health agency engaged in finding innovative solutions to prevent, diagnose, and treat diseases more quickly, cheaply, and effectively, in low- and middle-income countries. Its work includes funding initiatives to address major diseases such as HIV/AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis, as well as HIV co-infections and co-morbidities such as cervical cancer and hepatitis C, and cross-cutting areas, such as fever management. Unitaid is now applying its expertise to address challenges in advancing new therapies and diagnostics for the COVID-19 pandemic, serving as a key member of the [Access to COVID-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator](https://www.accessalliance.org/). Unitaid is hosted by the [World Health Organization](https://www.who.int) [www.unitaid.org](http://www.unitaid.org)