

Entertainment as a Vehicle for HIV Prevention: An Educational Movie Challenges Stereotypes Surrounding HIV in Georgia

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1. Introduction

HIV-associated stigma and discrimination are driven by misunderstanding and misinformation, and continue to affect individuals and communities in Georgia, fueling the HIV epidemic by discouraging people from seeking testing and treatment. While developing its behavior change communication strategies, the USAID-funded Georgia HIV Prevention Project (GHPP) tried to incorporate some innovative messaging into its HIV educational sessions, traditionally used by the project for school-aged children. With the aim of challenging stereotypes surrounding HIV and reducing stigma and discrimination, an educational movie that GHPP produced in 2013, *Restarted Game*, has become very popular among Georgian youth.



2. Description of Intervention

GHPP brought together people living with HIV (PLHIV), movie critics, journalists, screenwriters, healthcare providers, and public health professionals to develop a movie script. The process of script writing was interactive and iterative, as all of the contributors weighed every single word to ensure that educational messages were delivered in a memorable way.

The script tells the story of a young married couple and the phases of emotional and social change they go through after finding out they are HIV positive. The movie portrays the couple's fragile social environment and constant challenges and provides HIV prevention messages in a professional and sensitive manner. Prior to the movie's release, it was pretested among target groups, including PLHIV. The title of the movie, *Restarted Game*, was selected through stakeholder consensus.

The movie was broadcast on two national TV channels that reached 100,000 people throughout the country, free of charge, screened at various HIV awareness-raising events, including World AIDS Day, and posted on popular websites www.youtube.com and www.myvideo.ge and promoted through social media. The movie screening has become an integral part of GHPP-organized HIV peer-education sessions.

Schoolchildren who participated in the GHPP-organized movie screenings and educational sessions have said:

"... this was worth 1,000 lectures"

"I have read information about HIV transmission ways before... I have seen and listened to social ads in TV and or radio... but until today I have never thought of what infected persons must be going through."



3. Results

Education can take place in different environments using various methods of communication; however, HIV prevention and stigma reduction messages are most effective and compelling when they are personalized, visually memorable, and carefully tailored for the intended target group. *Restarted Game* provides a positive role model of the person with HIV living a happy and fulfilled life and encourages others to be positive.

This movie has been especially effective in communicating health messages and encouraging positive social and behavior change, particularly among youth.

The number of viewers who have accessed the film through free social media avenues continues to grow, as evidenced by the ever-increasing number of comments posted and discussions generated.

Active participation and correct responses to health education questions posed to participants during educational sessions that followed the movie demonstration suggest that information provided through storytelling is better memorized and stimulates vivid discussions about HIV.

At the end of one movie session convened at the Bazaleti summer camp, a 14-year old girl stood up and asked:

"Can I volunteer to become a blood donor?"

When she was told that in Georgia minors could not become blood donors, she got anxious and kept saying:

"There must be something I can do... to contribute..."

This session has proven that the movie can not only generate positive attitudes among viewers, but also can encourage them to become actively involved in HIV prevention.



4. Conclusions and recommendations

When the movie was screened during educational sessions, messages conveyed through storytelling resonated well among youth and generated lively interactions and discussions. Passionate and positive comments posted online demonstrate that *Restarted Game* has significant potential to increase HIV awareness and prevention knowledge, engender more compassionate attitudes towards PLHIV, and inspire people affected by HIV to live positive lives.

Mass media, especially TV, is a very powerful means of reaching out to thousands of people simultaneously, but purchasing prime airtime on popular TV channels is often considered too expensive for HIV prevention programs. However, GHPP's experience with *Restarted Game* has demonstrated that if a high-quality movie is produced, with solid potential to attract viewers, TV channels may be interested in broadcasting it at no cost. Additional recommendations include

- Active involvement of PLHIV at all stages of movie production is key to successful message development and communication.
- Electronic and social media allow cost savings compared with traditional media communication channels and offer access to low-cost metrics for monitoring numbers of viewers.
- Make your efforts sustainable—the movie has become a public good that will continue to educate and benefit Georgian communities beyond the life of a specific project.

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