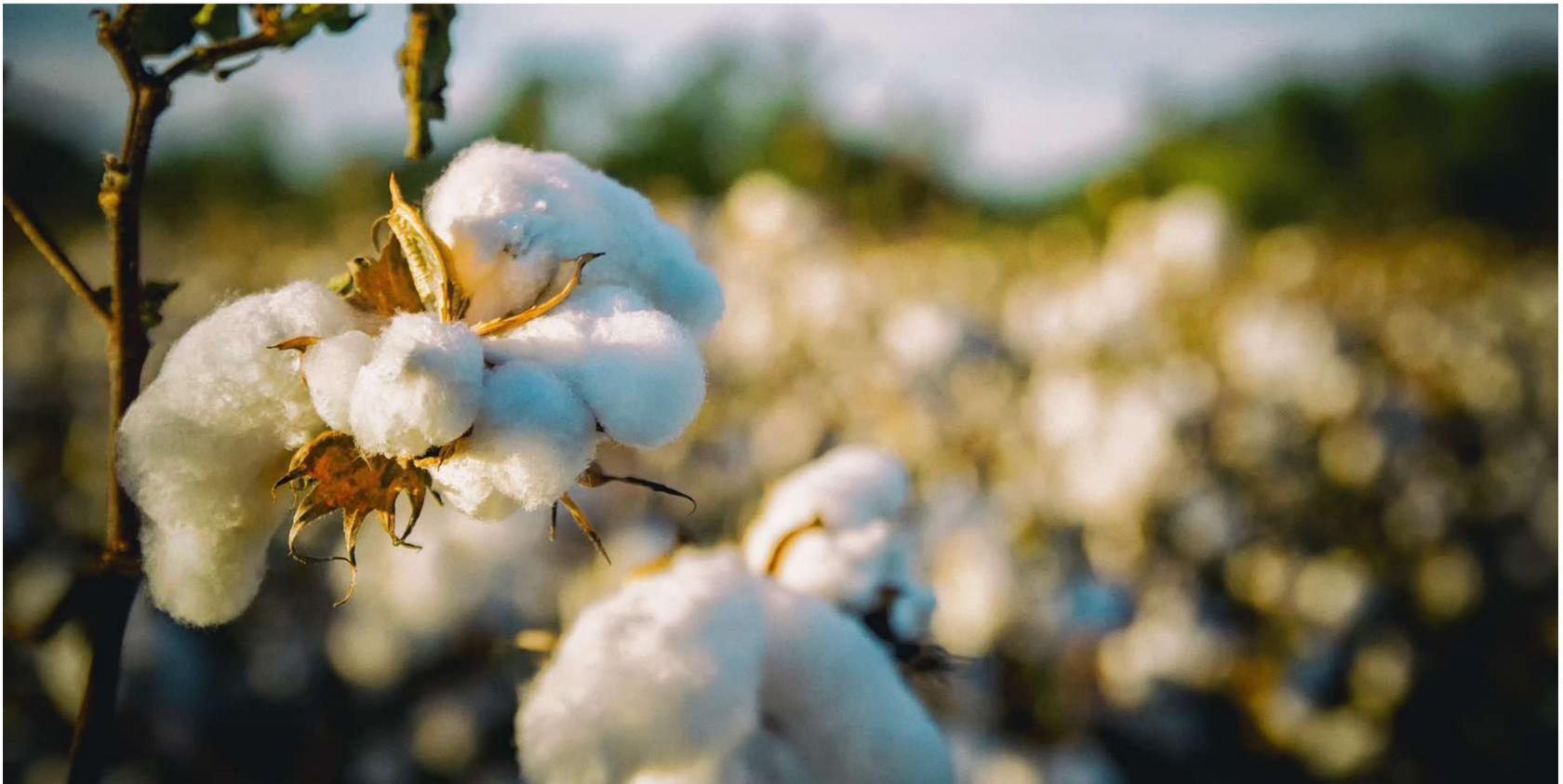
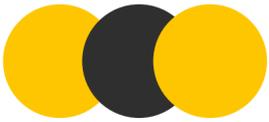


Raising U=U Awareness in the Deep South

A case study for public health
among MSM



Background

Throughout the United States, HIV/AIDS remains a significant threat to public health. Despite there being progress in treating HIV-related disease, HIV disproportionately impacts populations in southern states. Half of all newly diagnosed persons with HIV reside in southern states, despite less than 28% of the American population living there (Dailey et al., 2017). The rural nature of the region, along with cultural factors and racial composition may be to blame for this phenomenon (Reif et al., 2015;2017). Blacks are also disproportionately affected (CDC, 2018; Reif et al, 2017). Mississippi and Alabama specifically are similar in culture and demographics, however there are differences between the two states. Alabama is significantly larger than Mississippi, providing more resources for Men-Who-Have-Sex-with-Men (MSM). Mississippi MSM are also more likely to be Black than those MSM in Alabama.

U=U means Undetectable=Untransmittable

The U=U campaign motivates people living with HIV to seek treatment by informing them that taking their medication as prescribed will keep them healthy and reduce their viral load to an undetectable level, making it impossible for them to transmit the virus to HIV-negative people through sex.



Raising U=U Awareness in the Deep South



Percentage of Blacks

MS 2nd highest

AL 8th highest

Rural Population

MS 50%

AL 41%

Adults with Bachelor's Degree

MS 2nd lowest

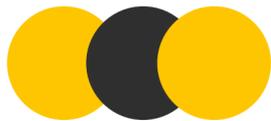
AL 7th lowest

Per capita rates of HIV in the Deep South are among the highest in the U.S. Deep South states represent approximately 25% of the US population, but 50% of U.S. HIV cases are being diagnosed there. Both Alabama and Mississippi are prototypical Deep South states, each having a high percentage of groups that are medically underserved, including African Americans, people with less education, and people living in rural areas.

Raising U=U Awareness in the Deep South

In 2021, The Henne Group and Prevention Access Campaign launched a three month communication and advertising campaign among MSM in Mississippi and Alabama to build awareness, believability, and acceptance of the U=U (undetectable=untransmittable) message.





Communication and Advertising Intervention



Social Media Advertising - Alabama and Mississippi

The goal of the communication campaign was to build awareness, believability, and acceptance of the U=U message among MSM in Mississippi and Alabama. The campaign included three waves of social media advertising in both Alabama and Mississippi from April 9th through June 6th, 2021, and peer-to-peer engagement from February 22 through May 28, 2021, in Mississippi only.

Social media ads ran from April 9th through June 6th, 2021.

- Three ads were utilized, each featuring a unique character -- each ad ran for 18 or 19 days in sequence. Each ad had the same main message: “(Dee/Kaleb/Fernando) is undetectable so she/he can’t pass HIV to anyone.” The ad units corresponded to the website look and feel.
- Viewers could click on the video link to be redirected to the video on the <https://preventionseries.org/> website. Once there, they could watch, share, or download the video, as well as access any of the other content on the site.
- The social media channels that were used included: Grindr, Jack’d, Scruff, Growlr, GBT Pages, Facebook/Instagram.

Assessment of Campaign Effectiveness

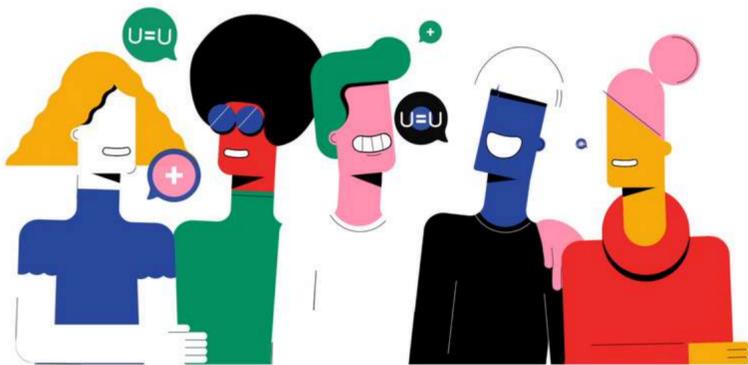
We conducted a longitudinal study of MSM in Mississippi and Alabama to evaluate the effectiveness of the campaign. We expected to find significant positive changes in both states, with Mississippi having more positive change than Alabama because only Mississippi received the 14-week peer-to-peer engagement component of the campaign. A total of 801 MSM, both HIV-positive and HIV-negative, were surveyed in the pretest with 504 of these MSM responding to the post-test.





Peer-to-Peer Engagement - Mississippi Only

Between February 22 and May 28, 2021 (14 weeks), three trained, full-time Prevention Access Campaign (PAC) ambassadors disseminated U=U information, held online meetings as well as limited in-person events with MSM in Mississippi, and built coalitions to educate communities about the benefits of U=U. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the peer-to-peer engagement was primarily virtual.



Prevention Access Campaign is a health equity initiative to end the dual epidemics of HIV and HIV-related stigma by empowering people with and vulnerable to HIV with accurate and meaningful information about their social, sexual, and reproductive health.

Their messages focus on the science behind U=U and advocacy to motivate HIV testing, treatment and prevention uptake, adherence, and engagement in care services.

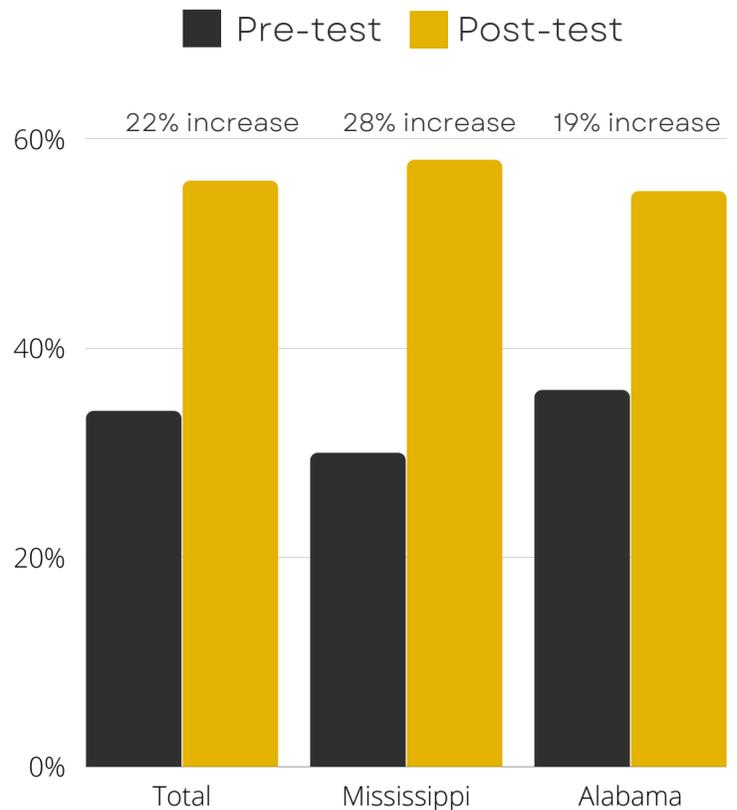




Findings

Overall U=U awareness increased by 22 percent. As a result of this increase, there was a larger change in Mississippi (+28%) than in Alabama (+19%), where peer-to-peer engagement occurred. Our study also found that U=U Campaign awareness was higher among MSM who were seeing a healthcare provider than those who did not see a healthcare provider. This is significant because our study found that 58 percent (6 in 10) of MSM are not seeing a healthcare professional and suggests that healthcare provider access plays a role in raising awareness.

Our study also reported that 78 percent of those who say other men like them would believe the U=U message also say they believe it themselves, which suggests that perceptions about what other MSM accept play a role in believability and acceptance.



Although just 26% of MSM were able to recognize a character from the social media advertising, those who did were more aware of the U=U message (73% vs. 50%) and were more likely to both believe (78% vs. 68%) and accept (59% vs. 38%) the message than were those who did not recognize a character.

Taken together, these findings suggest that properly-designed and executed advertising campaigns combined with peer-to-peer engagement strategies can increase U=U awareness in the MSM community. In addition, the higher levels of U=U Campaign awareness among MSM who are seeing a healthcare provider suggest that access to care may play a role in higher U=U awareness levels.

	Recognition of at least one character in our social media communications campaign	
	Recognize a character	Do not recognize a character
% Aware of U=U	73%	50%
% High believability	78%	68%
% High acceptance	59%	38%
Base(s)	130	374





Conclusion

Our research shows that social media campaigns can lead to an increase in awareness of U=U and, when augmented by a peer-to-peer component, can lead to a further increase in awareness of U=U. It additionally suggests that encouraging HIV-negative MSM to seek a health care provider can also lead to increased U=U awareness. Together, all of these components could be easily replicated in other locations.

About the Study

The Henne Group (THG) has a long and deep history of working in HIV prevention, conducting HIV-related qualitative and quantitative research studies since the early 1980s. Based in San Francisco, we offer a variety of consulting research, planning, and communications services to clients from the public and private sectors. At THG, our mission is to use research to amplify the voices of the underserved. Over the past 35 years, THG has specialized in all aspects of study design, survey instrument design, data collection, and analysis.

We have successfully completed hundreds of quantitative and qualitative research projects for a variety of government agencies, universities, not-for-profit organizations, major pharmaceutical companies, and other businesses. We have worked in a variety of fields, including public health, healthcare, transportation, and the environment. Our projects range from large-scale undertakings with complex and often difficult-to-implement procedures, to smaller outreach efforts with hard-to-reach priority populations.

This study was funded through the implementation science unit of ViiV Healthcare, and the peer-to-peer engagement with MSM in Mississippi was provided by Prevention Access Campaign. Analytic direction and support was provided by Q-Analytics.

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