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SUCCESS STORY

Everyone's a drama queen in USAID-funded web series, Gay OK Bangkok

Series mixes health messaging with soap opera storylines about love, trust, and HIV

Social media are not only a means for men who have sex with men (MSM) to find friends and sexual partners. They are also an important driver of the sexual norms that influence HIV risk among these men. The USAID- and PEPFAR-funded LINKAGES Thailand project is targeting these norms through an innovative web series, Gay OK Bangkok, which drew more than 60,000 viewers in March with a soapy story of love, trust, and HIV.

Gay OK Bangkok was developed and launched by the Asia-Pacific Coalition on Male Sexual Health (APCOM), a LINKAGES Thailand implementing partner, as part of their ongoing TestBKK campaign, which seeks to generate demand for MSM-friendly HIV testing services in Bangkok and around Thailand. The five-part web series, which was modeled on a popular Thai teenage television drama, Hormones, focuses on the relationship trials and tribulations of a group of young, gay men living in Bangkok. It weaves a number of health issues into its storylines, including HIV testing, treatment, and pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP). Viewers are directed to the TestBKK.org website for more information.

Big (Paween Naliang) waking buzzed with two strangers after he attended 'High Chem' sex with multiple partners with drugs involved.



In a groundbreaking step for Thai entertainment, well-known Thai soap opera actor Kanist Piyapaphakornkoon was cast as Nut (pron. Noot), a handsome and popular gay man who reveals early in the series that he is HIV positive. Mr. Piyapaphakornkoon was initially concerned that being identified with a gay character might have a negative impact on his career, and he knew very little about HIV before taking on this role. But he says he was convinced by the commitment of the production team and the opportunity to portray the gay community in a positive light.

"I stopped worrying, as I thought I am doing useful work for the society and can at least present other perspectives of gay life—rather than being a sad character as commonly presented in the media, or as a comic role," Mr. Piyapaphakornkoon explained. "I hope my role can represent many aspects of gay life."

Ben (Philip Limbumrung) gave Nat (Kanist Piyapaphakornkoon) a cheering hug after his boyfriend received the result of his first HIV testing.



Between March and April 2016, the five Gay OK Bangkok videos received more than 600,000 views, with a more than 1,000 percent increase in TestBKK YouTube channel subscribers (n=19,893) in the period since the web series was launched and more than 12,000 instances of active engagement (likes, shares, and comments) via YouTube and Facebook. Fans seemed to particularly appreciate the realistic portrayals of life for a young, gay Thai man:

"I have given consultations to my friends for situations similar to the two situations present in EP1; friend steals the person you have a crush on, and a partner has secretly chatted with other guys. These are real situations that are happening these days."

— Charnwit Pakam, via Facebook

It was equally important to audiences that the relationship between an HIV-positive person and his HIV-uninfected partner be handled sensitively, as this topic is rarely portrayed in Thai media:

"Serodiscordant relationships exist and there are many relationships as such in the society. I'm happy that Arm can accept Nut. There are many information out there on methods to protect ourselves and PrEP is one of the options. This is nicely done GAY OK!!"

— "Maximum Reverse," via Facebook

- and -

"Arm and Nut's relationship is so sweet because it feels like it's real .. I actually like how close they seem to be. I wish all [Thai soap operas] were as 'real' as this one." — "Draconi-chan," via Facebook

From February 20 to April 1, 2016, when the Gay OK Bangkok episodes were launched, there were 67,582 discrete visitors to TestBKK.org, a 3,836 percent increase over the previous period. "PrEP" and "Where to Get Tested" were the most popular content and the number of website visitors ordering condoms and lube online increased 600 percent during the campaign.

Because the final episode of Gay OK Bangkok only just aired, we cannot yet attribute any direct increase in HIV testing to this one campaign. However, LINKAGES has provided technical assistance to APCOM and to Mahidol University on the design of a multiple time series cohort study to track exposure to Gay OK Bangkok and other TestBKK activities over an 18-month period and examine associations not only with HIV testing and other key risk behaviors but also intermediary variables, such as having discussed HIV testing with a friend or partner. In the meantime, audiences online seem to be getting the point:

"Wow, the message at the beginning is powerful!!! It was on point, in general, everyone male, female, transgender, alternative, pansexual, trisexual and/or bi-curious (anyone) should get tested. Everyone should know their STD/HIV status." — MillaRaeDeshibeau, via Facebook

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