



CASCADE OF SERVICES FOR VIRTUAL POPULATIONS: STRATEGIES AND IMPLEMENTATION MODELS ON HIV TESTING AND PREVENTION

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Context

- There is a growing numbers of young people seeking connectivity and anonymity through online dating apps and sexual partners in the virtual space
- However, HIV testing approaches have been historically limited to physical sites, making it hard to reach young individuals potentially at risk for HIV
- ACCELERARTE launched in June 2021 Safe Zindagi, a web-based platform that offers comprehensive HIV and sexual health services with counselling support from virtual counsellors (vCs)
- SZ provides integrated HIV testing options by offering different testing modalities such as private or public labs, NGOs, paid and free options, and home delivery of HIV self-testing kits
- The platform also offers telemedicine-based pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), treatment initiation and retention through appointment booking with SZ doctors or referral to antiretroviral therapy (ART) centers, along with treatment literacy, risk assessment, and regular follow-up for re-testing and adherence

Activity Description

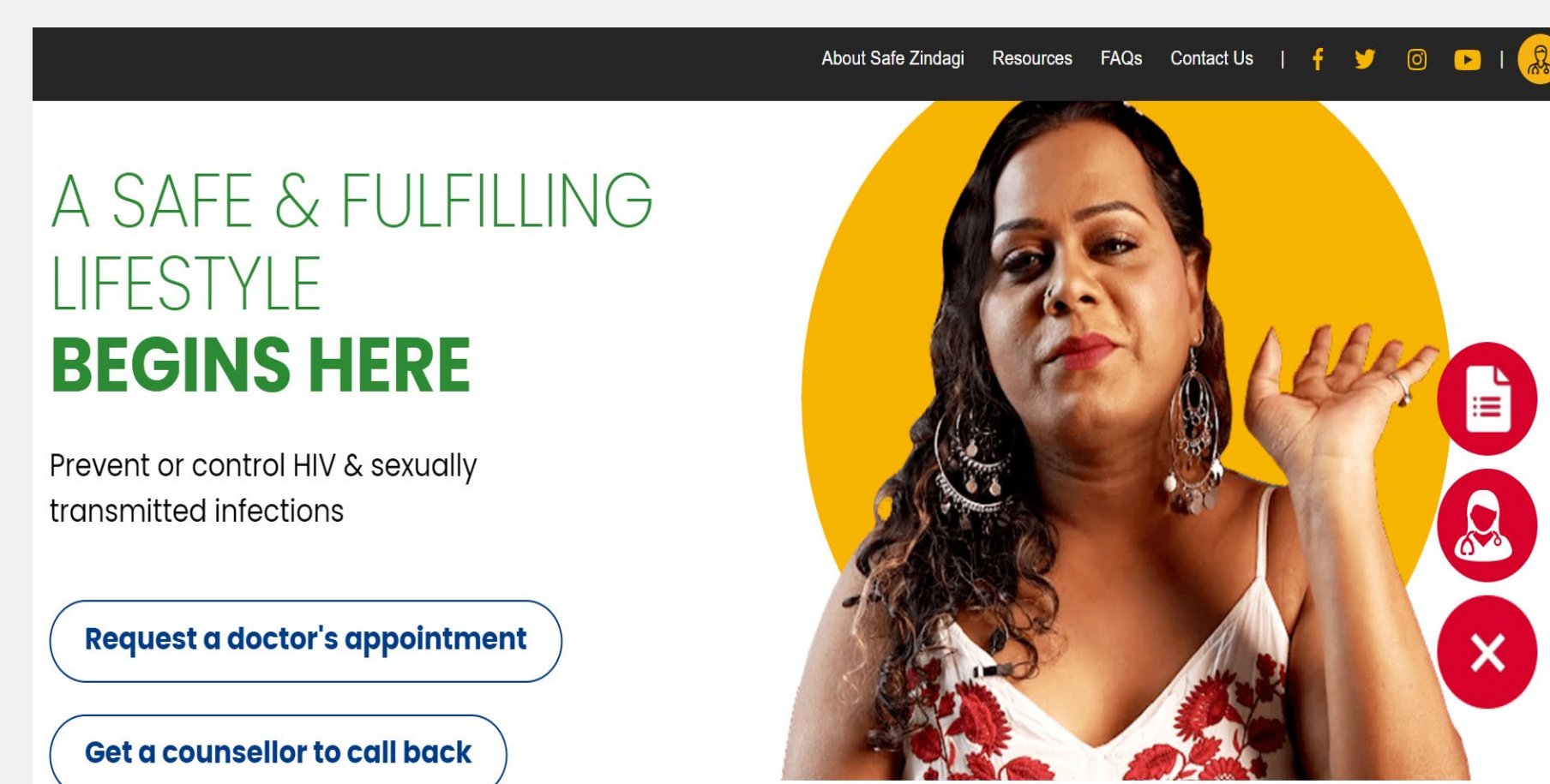
- Safe Zindagi has a team of 12 virtual counsellors (vCs) to reach potential clients through various channels such as: online dating platforms (Grindr, Tinder, Blued, and Planet Romeo), social media platforms (Instagram, Facebook), paid ads on Google display network, and an online network on WhatsApp (WA). They also collaborate with community-based organizations that work with an online community to reach at-risk individuals
- The vCs establish initial communication with clients online and then transition to WA to build rapport and ensure confidentiality. They also provide pre-test counseling and sexual health counselling
- The vCs assist clients in booking an HIV test through the SZ virtual platform. Clients have the option to choose the nearest testing center, including private laboratories with subsidized paid services (private labs), NGO-based labs, ICTCs (government testing centers), or home testing
- Clients must be at least 18 years old and complete a risk assessment and consent process before booking a test. The vCs follow up with clients to ensure the testing process is completed, and they provide post-test counselling
- If a client tests positive, the vCs assist with confirmatory testing at the ICTC and facilitate linkage to the ARTC for appropriate treatment. Negative high-risk clients are also counselled and linked to prevention services such as pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP)

Safe Zindagi approaches to client engagement:

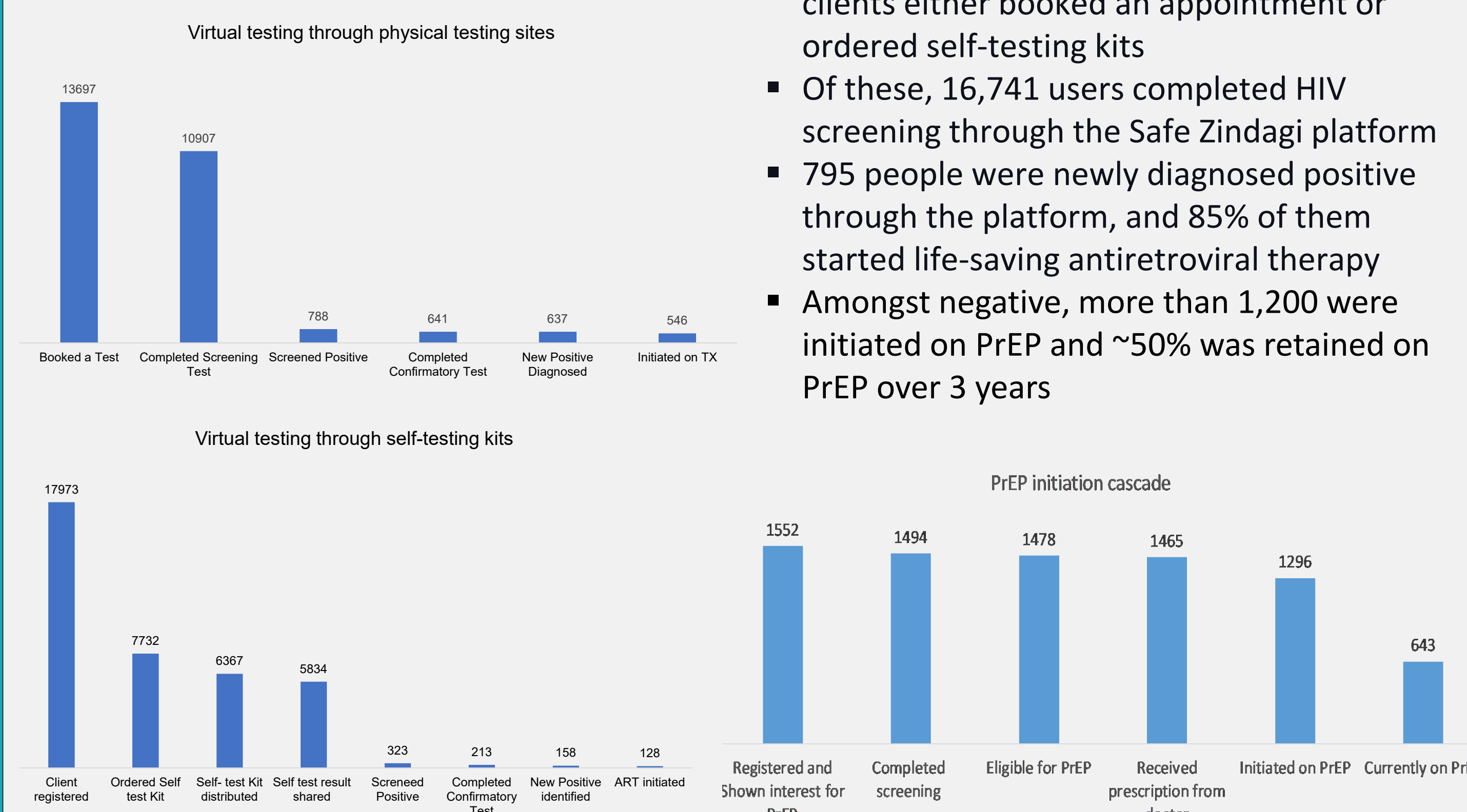
- Virtual to Virtual (HIV Self-Testing):** This approach involves clients who are reached virtually and seek services virtually without visiting any physical site
- Virtual to Physical (HIV Testing and PrEP):** These clients are guided by a virtual counselor to book a test on Safe Zindagi and then visit a facility-based testing site
- Physical to Virtual (Lab Testing Result):** Clients are reached through physical outreach by CBO/NGO and then register on the SZ online platform for online services

Activity Impact

- Safe Zindagi is a non-judgemental, reliable, and convenient sexual health platform that provides a range of services to users who are generally left out from the traditional HIV/AIDS programs
- The virtual platform provides privacy and security, becoming a trusted source of healthcare services for people across 28 cities in India
- The platform's HIV self-testing services, doctor consultations, health packages, and medicine delivery services have made it easier for people to access healthcare services from the comfort of their own homes
- The virtual implementation experience from Safe Zindagi has also influenced the National AIDS Control Program in the development of a 'White Paper on Strategies for Engaging with HIV at-risk Populations in Virtual Spaces', with key technical inputs from the project team



Evidence



- From October 2019 to March 2023, 31,670 clients either booked an appointment or ordered self-testing kits
- Of these, 16,741 users completed HIV screening through the Safe Zindagi platform
- 795 people were newly diagnosed positive through the platform, and 85% of them started life-saving antiretroviral therapy
- Amongst negative, more than 1,200 were initiated on PrEP and ~50% was retained on PrEP over 3 years

Facilitators

- The virtual platform was made possible with the support of the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the guidance of the National AIDS Control Organisation (NACO) and State AIDS Control Societies
- Safe Zindagi is implemented by the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine along with the prime implementing partner, YR Gaitonde Center for AIDS Research and Education (YRGCARE)
- The virtual operations are executed through a team of well-trained virtual counselors
- The website SafeZindagi.in is user friendly and easy to navigate
- The program has also created and leveraged a network of private practitioners and laboratories for PrEP referrals
- Collaborations with manufacturing and pharmaceutical companies to leverage donations and subsidies on diagnostics and medications
- Communications feedback to develop educational materials and marketing plans

Challenges

- It is not always possible to ensure that clients who visit or register on Safe Zindagi platform avail the services. This creates a gap between client visits, registration and service provided
- In some cases the virtual counselors (vCs) experience difficulties following up with clients and make sure they are adherent to PrEP
- Clients who receive HIV self-testing kits online do not always upload the test results on the online platform. This affects the numbers of test kits dispensed versus results received

Lessons Learned

- The experience emphasizes the benefits of using virtual counsellors to reach out individuals in dating apps and online spaces, and how a user-friendly platform with integrated service delivery can effectively reach a high-risk population that has largely been missed by traditional HIV programs
- Integration of HIV self-testing, PrEP, PEP, and telemedicine into these platforms has played a crucial role in advancing progress towards achieving the UNAIDS 95-95-95 targets

