



HIV Advocacy on TikTok

A new generation is using the social media sensation to promote sexual health.

March 27, 2023 By Charles Sanchez

There's no denying the growing power and influence of TikTok. With 1 billion active users globally, the short-form video app has been steadily gaining users since its launch in 2016, with a notable surge in the past few years amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Khartoon Weiss, the global head of agency and accounts at TikTok, defines the app as an entertainment platform rather than a social network. TikTok users can while away hours watching short videos of dance challenges, lip synchs, makeup tutorials, workout tips, recipes, pranks and more.

TikTok is not without controversy. The app was launched by the Chinese company ByteDance, and by law, the Chinese government can compel any company to share any user data it collects.

In December, Chris Wray, director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, told the House Committee on Homeland Security during a hearing that the FBI had security concerns, including the possibility that the Chinese government was using the app to gather private information about its users. And in February, Texas Governor Greg Abbott called for a ban of the app on all government devices, citing security risks.

Despite the big white balloons of controversy, TikTok continues to delight its users, especially young people. Some of them are also using the platform to spread awareness of HIV and sexual health via compelling content that employs humor and music to draw viewers and spark important conversations. Below are four such advocates.

Oliver Wong, 30

(he/him)

[@oliverwongcomedy](#)

Los Angeles

Oliver Wong

Courtesy of Oliver Wong

Oliver Wong's TikTok features clips from his hilarious stand-up, stories about his life in Southern California, racism challenges and a smidge of groovy dancing, but his most viewed videos are about HIV. The Taiwanese native came to the states seven years ago to attend film school and tested HIV positive two years ago. Two months after his diagnosis, he started chronicling his HIV journey on TikTok.

In a video that has garnered over 556,000 views, Wong talks about how he discovered he was living with HIV. “Within two to six weeks of your initial HIV infection,” he says in the video, “you develop flu-like symptoms. So I believe I was infected in November of 2020.” He goes on to describe the symptoms he started feeling a month or so later, which he thought might have been due to COVID. It wasn’t until February 2021 when he went to get tested for sexually transmitted infections (STIs), which he does regularly, that he found out he had HIV.

Wong was using TikTok before he was living with HIV. “As a stand-up comedian,” he says, “one of my jobs is to be as honest and sincere as I can be onstage so people can relate to me. Once I got HIV, I was like, I don’t want to hide. I don’t want to be funny onstage [without disclosing], there is a secret inside of me, which is HIV.” Because he already exposes so much of his life—his parents, his Asian-ness, his sexuality—in his stand-up and on social media, it was only natural that he add HIV to the mix. “I started to write jokes about HIV, and then I started to talk about it onstage,” he says, “and then after a month or two, I started to translate those jokes to TikTok.”

Wong, who also works as a director of straight adult films, has found that using TikTok has helped him deal with his diagnosis. “It’s really a therapeutic experience for me to make peace with my status as an HIV-positive person,” he says. “I think by talking about it in public, it really helps me to accept the fact that I’m dealing with this new reality.”

As for making jokes about HIV? Wong says it’s a soft way to get people to pay attention. “Humor lets people ease into a heavy topic such as HIV,” he says. “By making HIV a topic so light and digestible, I believe most people would be able to listen more. Most people associate HIV with death, which is not the case anymore—with modern medical advances—so I think using humor to talk about it can reverse people’s assumptions.”

Johneri’O Scott, 32

(he/him)

[@jscotttv](#)

Atlanta



Johneri’O Scott didn’t start using TikTok until August 2022, but he already has over 45,000 followers and 583,000 likes for his videos.

“I thought, Let me do things that educate and inspire and empower people,” Scott says. “Let me put myself, my life, as a living testament for those who may be feeling like they just contracted HIV and they’re going to die.” He wants to let people know the truth about HIV.

Scott was diagnosed with HIV in 2014, but he knew he couldn’t let the diagnosis stop him. “I just

had to educate myself because the stigma [and misinformation] around HIV was so thick, like if you have HIV, you're going to get AIDS. If you have HIV, you're going to die." After educating himself about the virus, finding support groups and community and asking a lot of questions, he wanted to help educate others. "That's when I fell in love with education of HIV and STDs [sexually transmitted diseases, or sexually transmitted infections (STIs)]," he says, "and just how many lives I've touched since coming out with my own story."

Johneri'O Scott

Courtesy of Johneri'O Scott

Scott's empowering TikTok videos tell the truth about HIV, shedding light on topics such as Undetectable Equals Untransmittable (U=U), pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), HIV and STI testing and more. In a video that has earned 2.9 million views, he humorously outlines how to tell whether your man has an STD. "Honey, if he's pre-cummin' way before you get started in bed, then guess what? Run! It may be an STD!"

One of the risks of being so visible on TikTok is that some viewer comments can be harsh, but Scott takes it in stride. “I know I’m comfortable with myself,” he says, “when they be like, ‘He’s lying—he don’t have HIV’ or ‘He’s just putting on a front,’ I just keep strolling, because you don’t really know me, and I don’t really know you.” He just continues doing his work: producing informative TikTok videos and encouraging regular HIV and STI testing. “When it comes to your sexual health,” he says, “you have to be really selfish.”

Melissa Strype, 34

(she/her)

[@thebiglissa](#)

Los Angeles

In one of Melissa Strype's TikTok videos, which has over 109,000 views, she's strolling down the aisle of a national office supply chain rapping, "Get to know your groin! How it smells! Take a whiff, make a note! Write it down! What's going down down there? I said, 'What's going down down there?!'"

Strype has been working in the sexual health arena for years, but her videos have opened up a new avenue for education. "I've been creating these comedic music videos about sexual health topics, and the topics are requested by my audience. So many young people are like, 'Can we do one about consent?' 'Can we do one about this STI?' 'Can we do one about pubic hair?'"

Strype is not shy about any topic. She's tackled smegma, sharts, queefs and condoms, and she believes using comedy is key. "If we can laugh about these really sensitive, scary, embarrassing topics, we're open to thinking about things in new ways," she says, "If we're able to laugh, we're opening ourselves up to having important conversations."

Strype's TikTok is a starting point. "There's a lot of great people doing work online talking about these issues in a more complex way," she says, "and what I try and do is really distill it down to a silly little thing that kind of gets caught in people's heads but that is going to make them laugh. But laughing to the point where they're like, 'OK, yeah, I get the overall message that she's saying, and I'm going to see how that applies to my life.'"

"My whole goal of doing this work online is to exude empowerment for folks," Strype says. She hopes that her use of comedy and music will inspire viewers to have conversations. "I hope they might say, 'I really enjoyed that. Let me think about this. I feel like I can go to my doctor.' 'I can talk to my partner.' 'I can talk to my parent about this kind of stuff.'"

Chase Cramer, 27

(he/him, they/them)

[@ChaseinSexEd](#)

Phoenix



"I pretty much went viral from showing cum on the walls," Chase Cramer says. The trans man is talking about their presence on TikTok, which centers on LGBTQ-inclusive sexual education. Cramer, who has over 225,000 followers, uses the platform to discuss HIV and STI testing, PrEP, sex toys and adult bookstores as well as more personal issues, like their pregnancy scares, hair loss and dealing with transphobes.

Cramer started making videos on TikTok about three years ago in their native New York. "I was working as a public health educator, traveling to various high schools with a nonprofit," they say. Cramer taught topics like HIV or birth control—whatever aspect of reproductive health the teacher wanted taught.

"When COVID hit, I launched a social media for the nonprofit. I started a TikTok for them, and it went viral," Cramer says, "It was doing really well. I reached the outreach numbers for the entire

five-year grant in one month, without spending a single company dollar.”

Unfortunately, Cramer says, their work at the nonprofit was discounted and downplayed. They were furloughed and took a job at an adult store. “I started ‘Sex Tour Story Time,’ which is how I started my social media.” The store had an arcade of adult video viewing booths, and Cramer would talk about the wild things that took place at the store and the people who came in.

Cramer would also tour other arcades. “I was like, ‘Hey! This is what arcades are,’” Cramer says. “There’s no need to be afraid of them. Here are some of the social rules I’ve learned. Like, some guys are on Grindr, but some of them, like the older guys, might leave a penny outside the door to let you know they’re available.”

Due to challenges finding enough work during the COVID lockdown, Cramer moved to Phoenix and started working as a phlebotomist and social outreach educator. They used the TikTok platform to educate people and tackle topics some folks might be afraid to ask about.

“When I was an educator, I felt so limited by the education I could provide because it was all scripted, and there are so many laws around what’s deemed appropriate to teach teenagers,” Cramer says. Through their TikTok, Cramer has been able to educate much more freely. “These topics that are considered taboo or inappropriate,” they say, “that’s the fire that lighted in me to start doing social media.”

Chase Cramer

Courtesy of Chase Cramer

“My journey with TikTok has been a long and rough one,” they say, “as the guidelines have constantly changed. For the longest time, I couldn’t say the words condom or lube without my

videos being taken down.” Cramer has also experienced people reporting their videos simply because they are trans. “I had some very conservative, MAGA Republican, Proud Boy kind of hate. Sometimes I’ve had to take breaks for months at a time.”

Cramer always returns, though, because they believe in the work. “I don’t get paid for most of the work that I do on TikTok,” they say, “Our sex ed [in the United States] is just so not realistic to the realities of sex. Our sex ed is: This is a condom,’ ‘This is HIV,’ ‘This is STIs,’ ‘You could get pregnant; here’s birth control.’ You can’t talk to teens about pleasure because that’s inappropriate.”

Cramer acknowledges that they still have to jump over hurdles when it comes to nonprofit work and the challenges of TikTok, but this platform allows them to push the envelope further and bring up more of the realities of sex. After all, Cramer says, “one of the most basic and probably the most universal human experiences is an orgasm.”

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