

AIDS

"I will choose when to test, where I want to test": Investigating young people's preferences for HIV self-testing in Malawi and Zimbabwe --Manuscript Draft--

Manuscript Number:	AIDS-D-17-00149R2
Article Type:	Supplement Article
Section/Category:	
Keywords:	HIV self-testing; preferences; adolescents; young people; discrete choice experiments; Malawi; Zimbabwe
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Manuscript Region of Origin:	MALAWI
Abstract:	<p>Objectives This study identifies young people's preferences for HIV self-testing (HIVST) delivery, determines the relative strength of preferences and explores underlying behaviors and perceptions to inform youth-friendly services in southern Africa.</p> <p>Design A mixed methods design was adopted in Malawi and Zimbabwe and includes focus group discussions (FGD), in-depth interviews (IDI) and discrete choice experiments (DCE).</p> <p>Methods This study was conducted during the formative phase of cluster randomized trials of oral-fluid HIVST implementation. Young people aged 16 to 25 years were purposively selected for IDIs (n=15) in Malawi and 12 FGDs (n=107) across countries. A representative sample of young people were administered a DCE on HIVST delivery, with data analyzed to estimate relative preferences for service characteristics. The qualitative results provided additional depth and were triangulated with the quantitative findings.</p> <p>Results There was strong concordance across methods and countries, with key preferences categorized into three domains: product, provider and service characteristics. HIVST was highly accepted by young people, if provided at no or very low cost. Young people expressed mixed views on oral-fluid tests, weighing perceived benefits with accuracy</p>

concerns. There was an expressed lack of trust in health providers and preference for lay community distributors. HIVST addressed youth-specific barriers to standard HIV testing, with home-based distribution considered convenient. Issues of autonomy, control, respect, and confidentiality emerged as key qualitative themes.

Conclusion

HIVST services can be optimized to reach young people if products are provided through home-based distribution and at low costs and with respect for them as autonomous individuals.

10 April 2017

AIDS

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Dear Editor,

RE: “I will choose when to test, where I want to test”: Investigating young people’s preferences for HIV self-testing in Malawi and Zimbabwe”

I write on behalf of my co-authors to thank you for the review of our manuscript. We have made the changes suggested by the reviewers and have included point-by-point responses below.

Yours sincerely,

Fern Terris-Prestholt

1. Can you please specify what proportion of the manuscripts the independent coder checked for inter-coder reliability?

**** Response: We have specified that 10 percent of transcripts were check for inter-coder variability. [p9]*

2. There are still a few places in which it's not clear if the results presented were derived from the IDIs or the FGDs. These are listed below.

a. Sentence: Preference between the different specimen collection methods was also similar: no strong preferences were revealed in the DCEs and the qualitative findings were mixed, with stated benefits of oral-fluid self-tests offset by concerns around accuracy. Comment: please specify, which qualitative findings were mixed

**** Response: This has been clarified to state that "...the FGD and IDI findings were mixed." [p12]*

b. Sentence: In Malawi, youth peer groups were also suggested as important conduits for supporting young people. Comment: please specify, IDIs or FGDs

**** Response: This has been clarified to stat that "In the Malawi FGDs and IDIs..." [p12]*

c. Sentence: Young people's preferred distribution of HIVST kits by lay community distributors across methods, with the qualitative research also revealing a lack of trust of HCWs. Comment: please specify if this is for IDIs in Malawi and FGDs in Malawi and Zimbabwe

**** Response: This has been clarified to state that "...with the FGDs and IDIs also revealing a lack of trust of HCWs." [p13]*

d. Sentence: Zimbabwe DCE did not reveal any strong preferences regarding the residence of distributors, which departed from some of the findings from the qualitative data. Comment: can this be stated as from the FGDS in Zimbabwe?

**** Response: This has been clarified to state that "...which departed from some of the findings from the FGD results." [p13]*

e. Sentence: Compared to Zimbabwe, participants in Malawi Comment: which participants?

**** Response: This has been clarified to state that "Compared to Zimbabwe, FGD and IDI participants in Malawi..." [p14]*

f. Sentence: In Zimbabwe, a minority of young men in an FGD reported wanting the autonomy of collecting the HIVST kit from a mobile or local clinic... Comment: Is this a minority of men in ONE fgd or across multiple fgds? Please specify.

**** Response: This has been clarified to state that "In Zimbabwe, a minority of men in one FGD..." [p14]*

g. Sentence: The counselor must be there but not during the entire process'. Comment: Please specify where this quote is from.

**** Response: We have now included the source and country. [p14]*

h. Sentence: Most participants were against using a hotline, citing the value attached to in-person dialogue especially for post-test support. Comment: please specify which participants (source and country)

**** Response: This has been clarified to state that "Most FGD and IDI participants in both countries..." [p15]*

i. Sentence: Young people in both IDIs and FGDs expressed that they were starting to become more independent, make... Comment: Is the FGDs for both Malawi and Zimbabwe? Please clarify.

**** Response: This has been clarified to state that "Young people across both methods and countries expressed..." [p15]*

j. Text: Further, there were mixed views on whether kits should be given individually or distributed in 'batches' to the household. While some young people worried that parents could deduce whether they were sexually active by their decision to accept a kit, others found it better if kits were offered to the whole household so no attention was placed on the young person's choice. Comment: Is all this text related to the FGDs in Zimbabwe?

**** Response: This has been clarified to state that "Further, there were mixed views in the FGDs in both countries ..." [p15]*

k. Text: This was also reflected in the qualitative research, where young people wanted the option of accessing in-person support if needed. In the Zimbabwe DCE, there were no strong preferences for batched distribution of HIVST kits, which complemented the mixed findings from the qualitative research. Comment: please clarify by what is meant by qualitative research in the text above.

**** Response: This has been clarified to state that "This was also reflected in the FGDs and IDIs..." [p15]*

3. The representative quotes are primarily from Zimbabwe and only one is from a Malawi IDI, none from FGDs in Malawi. There are also no quotes supporting the qualitative findings under "Provider Characteristics," although it seems that many themes were reported in this section. We wanted to draw your attention to this fact. We realize the authors are limited in their ability to add quotes due to limits in word count, but it might strengthen the paper to include representative quotes that are better distributed across countries and sources, and present quotes for more themes.

**** Response: Thank you. We have now included a quote to support the qualitative findings under the provider characteristics section. We have also tried to integrate more quotes across countries and sources (Malawi: 1 male IDI, 2 female FGD; Zimbabwe: 3 male FGD, 1 female FGD). While this is not a perfect balance across countries and methods, we feel that we have selected the most illustrative quotes. We would be happy to upload a supplementary table with quotes from all methods and sources to reassure reviewers if needed.*

4. Table 4

Comment: Table 4 does not reflect nuances between IDIs and the FGDS. Can the data for IDIs and FGDS

be separated into 2 columns? This representation suggests there were not different conclusions drawn from these data. Is this what the authors want to convey? If it is not possible to separate into 2 columns, then please clearly label the data sources.

**** Response: Thank you for the comment. We have labeled that data sources as suggested. We believe this will effectively present the results from the FGDs and IDIs, which often led to similar conclusions, while still highlighting differences in the unit of analysis.*

5. There are a few results listed in the text that do not match the tables.

a. Please verify the following numbers: Should $U=0.0103$ $P<.05$ to a trained health care worker be changed to ($U=0.085$, $p\leq 0.10$)?

b. Please verify the following numbers: should intimate partner $U=-0.122$, $p<.05$ be Changed to ($U=-0.122$, $p\leq 0.10$)?

c. Sentence: instruction leaflet ($U= 0.141$, $p\leq 0.05$). In

Comment: please check this value. Should it have a negative number. ($U=0.141$)

**** Response: Thank you for the comments. The estimates you identified are correct and have been altered accordingly in the text.*

6. There are a few additional questions from the biostatistician who reviewed this draft of the manuscript.

a. Regarding this sentence “Households from enumeration areas were first randomized to the survey.”

Comment: Do you mean the sampling was a two-stage sampling design where Eas were randomly selected in the first stage and household were randomly selected in the second stage? “Random selection” is different than “randomization”. Please clarify.

**** Response: Thank you for the comment. We have adjusted the sentences as follows: “We employed a two-stage sampling design. Households from enumeration areas in both countries were first randomly selected for survey; household members aged 16 years or older were eligible. Next, eligible participants in Malawi who had a recent negative test or did not know their HIV status were randomly allocated the DCE. In contrast, the first 300 eligible participants in Zimbabwe were given the DCE regardless of HIV status.”*

b. Sentence “Estimates generated from the MNL, RPL and GML models were largely robust across models (Appendix 2).” Comment: The presentation of results in the appendix is different from the presentation in table 3. One category of every variable is missing, why? With effect coding all categories would be associated with a parameter in the model. Please clarify

**** Response: This is indeed the case. The betas for the omitted attribute level can be retrieved using the formula: $-1 * (\text{sum of all levels in an attribute})$. To retrieve standard errors for the MNL, the estimation can be rerun changing the omitted category. However, the RPL and GML models obtain estimates by simulation, leading to slightly different standard errors depending on the omitted categories. It is common to present these results without the omitted categories and allow the reader to calculate these utility values. However, if desired we are happy to a. include the calculated utility values for the omitted categories. b. present the RPL and GML models run with different omitted categories, though this is*

cumbersome in presentation. Please let us know how the prefer format should be if not the current concise version.

c. Sentence: This was preferred over mobile clinics, which had a negative preference, (Malawi: $U=-0.170$, $p\leq 0.01$; Zimbabwe: $U=-0.669$, $p\leq 0.05$), and health facilities (Malawi: $U=-0.140$, $p\leq 0.10$; Zimbabwe: $U=-0.030$, $p>0.10$). Comment: Suggest deleting “which had a negative preference” Given the effect coding, utility estimates are relative to the overall mean, so the preference is not negative. The level is less preferred than other levels of the attribute. Please check interpretation.

**** Response: Thank you for the comment. We agree and have taken out ‘which had a negative preference’.*

“I will choose when to test, where I want to test”: Investigating young people’s preferences for HIV self-testing in Malawi and Zimbabwe

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Running head: HIV self-testing preferences for among young people

Word count: 3864 words

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Funding source: This work is supported by UNTAID, grant number: PO#8477-0-600.

Abstract

Objectives

This study identifies young people's preferences for HIV self-testing (HIVST) delivery, determines the relative strength of preferences and explores underlying behaviors and perceptions to inform youth-friendly services in southern Africa.

Design

A mixed methods design was adopted in Malawi and Zimbabwe and includes focus group discussions (FGD), in-depth interviews (IDI) and discrete choice experiments (DCE).

Methods

This study was conducted during the formative phase of cluster randomized trials of oral-fluid HIVST distribution. Young people aged 16-25 years were purposively selected for IDIs (n=15) in Malawi and 12 FGDs (n=107) across countries. A representative sample of young people were administered a DCE on HIVST delivery, with data analyzed to estimate relative preferences for service characteristics. The qualitative results provided additional depth and were triangulated with the quantitative findings

Results

There was strong concordance across methods and countries based on the three triangulation parameters: product, provider and service characteristics. HIVST was highly accepted by young people, if provided at no or very low cost. Young people expressed mixed views on oral-fluid tests, weighing perceived benefits with accuracy concerns. There was an expressed lack of trust in health

providers and preference for lay community distributors. HIVST addressed youth-specific barriers to standard HIV testing, with home-based distribution considered convenient. Issues of autonomy, control, respect, and confidentiality emerged as key qualitative themes.

Conclusion

HIVST services can be optimized to reach young people if products are provided through home-based distribution and at low costs, with respect for them as autonomous individuals.

Key words: HIV self-testing, preferences, adolescents, young people, discrete choice experiments, Malawi, Zimbabwe

Introduction

Young people aged 15-24 years account for a third of people with HIV in sub-Saharan Africa and a third of new infections worldwide [1]. HIV testing among this population remains disproportionately low compared to adults, with coverage even lower among adolescents aged 15-19 years [2, 3]. Late HIV diagnosis, delays in antiretroviral therapy (ART) initiation and poor adherence to treatment has resulted in poor clinical outcomes among this age group [4-7].

Young people experience unique barriers to standard HIV testing services (HTS) that contribute to low uptake of HIV testing. Individual and household-level barriers include perceptions of low risk of HIV infection, emotional burden of dealing with a positive test result and absence of support from family and friends [8, 9]. On a community and health-systems level, stigma around HIV testing in communities, fear of disrespect by health care providers, concerns over confidentiality and issues of parental or guardian consent can prevent young people from accessing HTS [8-12]. Young people are also rarely financially independent and therefore disproportionately affected by actual and perceived costs of accessing services [8, 11].

HIV self-testing (HIVST), the process in which a person collects his or her own specimen, performs the test and interprets the results, is now recommended as an additional approach by the World Health Organization [13]. This approach has potential for reaching young people and overcoming some of the barriers associated with HTS [14]. Key motivations for young people in sub-Saharan Africa to self-test include greater confidentiality, privacy, convenience and the perception that oral-fluid self-test kits are easy to use [15-18]. Compared to other age groups, adolescents aged 16-19 years old had the highest uptake of HIVST when delivered to communities in urban Malawi [19]. While young people appear to have an interest in HIVST, research on their

preferences for HIVST delivery – specifically around product, provider and distributor characteristics – is limited. A greater understanding of young people’s preferences is needed to inform and develop optimal youth-friendly HIVST strategies that will facilitate uptake of testing and linkage to prevention and treatment.

Methods

A mixed methods design was used to identify young people's preferences for how HIVST should be delivered; to determine the relative strength of preferences; and to explore behaviours and perceptions that may underlie preferences. Figure 1 details the tool design and data collection process and how the methods supported and built on each other and ultimately provided a comprehensive framework for understanding preferences. Focus group discussions (FGD) explored group perceptions and in-depth interviews (IDI) aimed to gain more insight into sensitive issues and create an environment for people to disclose previous testing and HIV status. Discrete choice experiments (DCE), a method for measuring stated preferences for goods or services, were informed by the qualitative research and provided a quantitative estimate of preferences [20-22]. By asking people to choose between alternative bundles of HIVST delivery characteristics, choice data can be analyzed to understand key drivers of demand.

Data collection

This research was nested within the formative phase of a series of parallel cluster randomized trials of community distribution of oral-fluid self-test kits (OraQuick® HIV Self-Test) under UNITAID/PSI Self-Testing Africa (STAR). The formative studies and trials aimed to inform and evaluate country-specific programming, resulting in different research designs and sampling methods. Studies were guided by intercountry research questions, which enabled analyses to be

conducted across contexts despite differences in designs. The qualitative studies and DCEs were conducted between April to September 2016 in Malawi (Blantyre, Machinga, Mwanza, and Neno districts) and Zimbabwe (Mazowe district). Ethical approvals were obtained from the College of Medicine Research Ethics Committee in Malawi, the Medical Research Council of Zimbabwe and the Research Ethics Committee of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

For the FGDs and IDIs, topic guides across the two countries aimed to elicit views on barriers and facilitators to HIV testing, values and preferences for HIVST and perceptions around social impacts from HIVST. Participants, aged 16-25 years, were recruited from communities undergoing pilot HIVST implementation. In Malawi, residents who had self-tested were purposively sampled to ensure representation by women and men and whether or not they had previously tested for HIV. Participants in Zimbabwe were similarly sampled by sex as well as whether or not they had self-tested. In total, 15 IDIs and three FGDs (n=23) were conducted in Malawi and nine FGDs (n=84) were administered in Zimbabwe. FGDs and IDIs were conducted in local languages, audio-recorded, and transcribed and translated into English.

Emerging themes from the qualitative data, as well as findings from a literature review and ranking exercise with qualitative participants on HIV testing characteristics relevant to each country, informed the DCE design process (Fig. 1), which adhered to standard guidelines [23]. The DCEs consisted of a set of scenarios, each comprised of two alternative approaches for delivering HIV testing (Appendix 1). The Malawi DCE also included the option to select the status quo. Pictorial representations of these scenarios were developed to facilitate comprehension of the alternative services. Using prior parameters generated from a pilot, we created an unlabelled d-efficient

design, considered leading practice [24], in *Ngene* (version 1.21.1, ChoiceMetrics Pty Ltd, Australia) to identify the fewest number of choice sets for estimating all parameters [25].

The DCEs were nested within larger population-based household surveys conducted at baseline in Malawi and after pilot distribution in Zimbabwe under the respective cluster randomised trials (see hivstar.lshtm.ac.uk). We employed a two-stage sampling design. Households from enumeration areas in both countries were first randomly selected for the survey; household members aged 16 years or older were eligible. Next, eligible participants in Malawi who had a recent negative test or did not know their HIV status were randomly allocated the DCE. In contrast, the first 300 eligible participants in Zimbabwe were given the DCE regardless of HIV status. Participants were randomly assigned to one of 40 sets of six choice scenarios using an electronic tablet-based questionnaire in Malawi and one of two sets of nine choice scenarios using a paper-based questionnaire in Zimbabwe. Interviewers explained the attribute levels (Table 1) and illustrations and provided a demonstration of the oral-fluid self-test before participants were asked to select their preferred service for each scenario. Sample size was calculated using the rule of thumb by Johnson and Orme [26], suggesting a minimum sample size of 170 in Malawi and 110 in Zimbabwe. Given our focus on young people, we only analyzed choice data from participants aged 16-25 years. While this sample (n=245 in Malawi and n=96 in Zimbabwe) was sufficient for estimating strength of preference for the attribute levels, it did not allow for robust estimation of variation in preferences between sub-groups of young people.

Data management and analysis

The qualitative data, while informing the DCE design, were analyzed as an independent data source to provide additional depth in understanding preferences and reflect the breadth of enquiry.

A framework analysis was used to deductively generate themes around user preferences, including product, provider and service characteristics, and inductively construct themes that arose frequently from the data in both countries [27]. Inter-country coding frameworks were developed and emerging themes were identified through collaborative analysis of the field notes and collected data and in-person discussions of researchers and implementers. Transcripts were coded in *NVivo* (version 10, QSR International, Burlington, Massachusetts, USA) by one researcher in each country, with an independent coder checking 10 percent of transcripts for inter-coder reliability. Data were analyzed to ensure that commonalities or differences between individuals and groups as units were visible.

DCE data were cleaned using *Stata Statistical Software* (version 14, StataCorp, College Station, Texas, USA). Utilities (U), representing the strength of relative preferences, were estimated for each country using discrete choice models in *Nlogit*. Choice data, elicited from the choice made between the service alternatives, were first analyzed using a multinomial logistic model as a basic model. Random parameter logit (RPL) and generalised mixed logit (GMXL) models were then introduced to respectively allow for unobserved preference heterogeneity in addition to scale heterogeneity [28]. Effects coding was used for attribute levels, which were categorical except for price. Three common attributes were included across countries that could be directly compared: price of kit, point of distribution, and level of pre-test support.

Key preferences elicited from the DCE and qualitative data were categorized into the following domains: 1) product features such as price and specimen collection method; 2) provider characteristics including occupation; and 3) service attributes for example the location of distribution. Findings within each of these categories were triangulated across methods and

classified as consistent, complementary (if providing more depth or a different perspective), or contradictory.

Results

Background characteristics of DCE and qualitative participants are detailed in Table 2 and reflect representation among young people across sex, education, employment status, marital status and prior HIV testing. Most participants were women and had previously tested for HIV. In comparison to Malawi, more young people in Zimbabwe had higher education levels, were employed with a regular salary, or were unmarried.

In this section, we present the DCE and qualitative results around preferences for product, provider and service delivery attributes followed by the triangulation results. Estimates generated from the MNL, RPL and GMXL models were largely robust across models (Appendix 2). The gamma and tau parameters, which test for unobserved and scale heterogeneity, were highly insignificant for the GMXL model ($p=0.94$ in Malawi and $p=0.78$ in Zimbabwe for both parameters). The MNL estimator also had the lowest Akaike's Information Criterion values, meaning this model was the best fit for our data. In Table 3, we present the MNL estimates in detail. The results from the method triangulation are shown in Table 4, with the qualitative analysis providing additional depth in explaining the strength of preference as well as identifying important divergent views and concerns among young people.

Product characteristics

For the DCE, price had a very strong influence on testing choices in both Malawi ($U=-4.874$, $p<0.01$) and Zimbabwe ($U=-1.691$, $p<0.01$). The strength of these preferences can be interpreted

relative to changes in other attribute levels. For example, an increased price of USD 0.10 in Malawi would lead to a utility loss of -0.487. Including another attribute level with an equally large but positive utility could compensate for the effect of such a price increase. In Malawi, the DCE did not identify any significant preferences between the specimen collection methods (e.g., oral fluid self-test, blood-based self-test, and provider-delivered blood-based test).

The FGD and IDI results in both countries revealed that HIVST kits should be no to very low cost, with price acting as a barrier to testing. In Malawi, this was seen to be particularly important for those who were not working or financially dependent on their families. In terms of the self-testing product, young people across countries saw it as an innovative technology and appreciated the ability to control the testing and disclosure process.

I will choose when to test, where I want to test, and I can determine how private the place of testing is... 19-year-old man, FGD, Zimbabwe

While there was strong consensus in FGDs around self-testing, views around performance and accuracy of the different specimen collection methods diverged. Participants expressed that they were more accepting of oral-fluid tests than older people and talked about benefits such as ease-of-use, flexible point of access, and painless specimen collection compared to finger prick for blood-based testing. There was, however, the perception that blood-based tests were more accurate, a view held more strongly in FGDs in Zimbabwe than Malawi as expressed here:

Many said [oral-fluid tests were not] reliable because ... the virus is in the blood. So many were not satisfied with this self-testing. 16-year-old woman, FGD, Zimbabwe

When the results were triangulated across the DCE and qualitative methods, preferences for product characteristics were found to be consistent, with participants desiring for HIVST kits to be free of charge or very low cost. Preference between the different specimen collection methods was also similar: no strong preferences were revealed in the DCEs and the FGD and IDI findings were mixed, with stated benefits of oral-fluid self-tests offset by concerns around accuracy.

Provider characteristics

In Malawi, young people preferred to obtain an HIVST kit from a minimally-trained community distributor ($U=0.085$, $p<0.10$) to a trained health care worker ($U=0.037$, $p\geq 0.10$) or intimate partner ($U=-0.122$, $p<0.10$). Meanwhile, participants in Zimbabwe were indifferent to the age group of providers and whether they came from the same community. Each of these provider attributes were country-specific and could therefore not be compared across settings.

FGD and IDI participants in both countries felt that HIVST would motivate young people to test in settings characterised by distrust in health workers to convey the correct results and keep information confidential. There was a stated preference for lay community distributors, though there were some concerns raised in the Malawi FGDs around their counseling qualifications. In the Malawi FGDs and IDIs, peer groups were also suggested as important conduits for supporting young people. Further, participants in Zimbabwe expressed desire to have distributors residing in the same village, as this facilitated availability of support and assistance if needed:

[The distributor] could give the kit ... and must come back again to provide support, which is easier if he is from our community. *20-year-old man, FGD, Zimbabwe.*

The DCEs and qualitative results provided complimentary insights on preferences for provider characteristics. Young people preferred distribution of HIVST kits by lay community distributors across methods, with the FGDs and IDIs also revealing a lack of trust of HCWs. The Zimbabwe DCE did not reveal any strong preferences regarding the residence of distributors, which departed from some of the findings from the FGD results.

Service delivery characteristics

In terms of location of distribution, the DCE results revealed that access at home was favoured in Malawi ($U=0.350$, $p<0.01$) and Zimbabwe ($U=0.699$, $p<0.05$). This was preferred over mobile clinics (Malawi: $U=-0.170$, $p<0.01$; Zimbabwe: $U=-0.669$, $p<0.05$) and health facilities (Malawi: $U=-0.140$, $p<0.10$; Zimbabwe: $U=-0.030$, $p\geq 0.10$). Compared to other characteristics, these attribute levels were some of the most important drivers of demand for young people. Participants across countries were indifferent to the level of pre-test assistance, which included instruction leaflets, telephone hotlines and in-person support. Other attributes relating to service delivery were explored separately in each country. In contrast to being indifferent to approaches for pre-test support, participants in Malawi preferred in-person assistance following self-testing ($U= 0.126$, $p<0.05$) rather than just the instruction leaflet ($U=-0.141$, $p<0.05$). In Zimbabwe, participants did not have strong preferences for other service delivery characteristics, including hours of operation and distribution of batches of HIVST kits to the entire household.

In the FGDs and IDIs, young people appreciated the convenience and savings in time and transportation costs associated with home distribution of HIVST kits.

I thought it wise to go for [self-testing] when ... introduced in this community, so I decided to test because I had access... I was not supposed to walk a distance for testing. 23-year-old man, IDI, Malawi

Accessing HIVST and taking the test at home was also seen to provide greater privacy and encourage action among those who had procrastinated over testing. In both countries, where HIV testing and treatment services were often offered in the same location within health facilities, some participants felt people were afraid of being seen as expressed in this quote:

People can't be going to the hospital for an HIV test... Once I go there today, the news is going to spread everywhere and people will know that so and so is HIV positive. 22-year-old woman, FGD with female youth peer group, Malawi

Compared to Zimbabwe, FGD and IDI participants in Malawi were more open to collecting kits from local clinics, mobile clinics or even community gatherings. There was also the view that hospitals ensured better safe-keeping of testing devices. In Zimbabwe, a minority of young men in one FGD reported wanting the autonomy of collecting the HIVST kit from a mobile or local clinic as this gave them more control over when to test, illustrated here:

I say no to a fixed date that they decide to come; I won't want it [the test kit] at that time. So if I collect at the clinic it is good; I will go and collect from the clinic when I want to. 19-year-old man, FGD, Zimbabwe

Despite some concerns about confidentiality, availability of in-person support was highly favoured by participants from both countries and balanced this conflict by suggesting that '*The counselor must be there but not during the entire process*' (22-year-old female, FGD, Malawi). Providers were viewed as important in offering information and preparing users for dealing with HIV

positive results. Most FGD and IDI participants in both countries were against using a hotline, citing the value attached to in-person dialogue especially for post-test support.

Young people across both methods and countries expressed that they were starting to become more independent, make decisions for themselves and, at the same time, were exploring their sexuality and boundaries, leading to some clashes in household dynamics, including decision-making about testing. In one FGD in Zimbabwe, young people said they disliked when community distributors spoke to their parents without consulting them directly despite being above the age of consent. Further, there were mixed views in the FGDs in both countries on whether kits should be given individually or distributed in 'batches' to the household. While some young people worried that parents could deduce whether they were sexually active by their decision to accept a kit, others found it better if kits were offered to the whole household so no attention was placed on the young person's choice. The reverse was also brought up with participants, mentioning that coercion of young people to test may be more likely to occur in situations where distribution was batched.

Evaluating the results from the DCE with the qualitative results, home access of HIVST was consistently preferred across methods. In contrast, FGD and IDI participants in Malawi were open to distribution through health facilities and mobile clinics, which differed from the DCE results. DCE participants in Malawi preferred more comprehensive support beyond the instruction leaflet after self-testing. This was also reflected in the FGDs and IDIs, where young people wanted the option of accessing in-person support if needed. In the Zimbabwe DCE, there were no strong preferences for batched distribution of HIVST kits, which complemented the mixed findings from the qualitative research.

Discussion

This is the first study to explore young people's preferences for HIVST in Malawi and Zimbabwe and comes at a time when many countries are starting to scale-up HIVST as an additional approach to reach untested populations [13]. We found that HIVST is highly acceptable to young people in these countries as it empowers them to choose the location and timing of the test and disclosure around their results. Young people were attracted by the innovative new technology and appreciated the decision-making autonomy and control it gave them at a time of life when they were becoming more independent from their parents and more sexually active. Young people liked the convenience, confidentiality and perceived ease-of-use. Across the qualitative and DCE results, young people felt strongly that HIVST should be free and distributed at home, with some form of in-person support available if needed.

The high acceptability of HIVST has been described among young people in other settings in sub-Saharan Africa [15, 29, 30], however, these studies provide limited information on young people's preferences around HIVST delivery characteristics. Previous studies have largely reported that oral-fluid tests were appealing because they were easy to use, painless and did not require a blood sample [15, 16, 31]; although a study in Tanzania reported dislike for this method due to lack of familiarity [32]. Our study pointed to concerns by young people around accuracy of oral-fluid tests, a finding that has previously been cited in the United States [17, 18]. HIVST programmes promoting oral-fluid tests will need information about their functioning and accuracy to address these concerns. Given young people's low liquidity and strong aversion to price, the findings also show that uptake of HIVST may be limited if kits are not provided for free or at extremely low prices.

Young people's strong preferences for home delivery of self-test kits and some in-person support by community providers contrasted with the desire for total privacy. Home-based testing offered a way for young people to overcome issues of access and visibility associated with facility-based HTS [8, 9, 11, 33, 34, 35]. Meanwhile, availability of in-person support was reported as being important if additional information or assistance was required in the case of a positive test. In Kenya, preference for post-test support was found to be more pronounced among young people than adults [15]. This may be particularly important for young people, since studies suggest that linkage to care for this population has been sub-optimal in the contexts of home and community-based HIV testing in Kenya and South Africa [36, 37].

Being empowered to control one's own HIV testing process seems to be particularly appealing to young people [38]. As they transition from childhood to adulthood, they are given or demand greater autonomy and independence. Being responsible and taking charge of one's own life and health motivates young people to test for HIV [8, 11, 39], which resonates with our findings that empowerment and control act as motivators for young people to test. Confidentiality was the main reason why young people preferred HIVST [15, 16]. Young people's lack of trust of health workers and desire for confidentiality has been described elsewhere [11, 33, 40, 41] and motivated young people's preference for HIVST in this study. Our study also shows preference for lay community distributors, with on-going pilot studies under the STAR Consortium confirming this in practice [42, 43]. In Kenya, where home-based HIV testing by lay counsellors has been successful [39, 44], the integration of HIVST onto existing community health platforms could become a model for HIVST in the future. In the context of a gap between biological and psychosocial maturity, as well as discrepancies in cultural and social and legal definitions of maturity, promoting HIVST in young

people may not be without conflicts, including denied or forced testing. Appropriate training of distributors and sensitization of parents and the wider community would therefore be needed.

There were a number of limitations to our study. The DCE and qualitative research were nested within country-specific cluster randomized trials of community-based HIVST implementation, resulting in distinctive research designs and sampling methods in each country. Despite this, results were largely consistent and complementary. Sample size calculations for the DCE were based on the total population and did not provide enough degrees of freedom to robustly examine differences in preferences among sub-groups of young people. Although participants were asked about preferences for oral-fluid and blood-based self-tests, none had seen a blood-based self-test, which may have influenced stated preferences for oral-fluid tests.

Our study adds to the evidence on preferences for HIVST delivery among young people, with potential implications for reducing current testing gaps among this hard-to-reach age group. Uptake of HIVST among young people is most promising if distribution of test kits is convenient, that is provided through home-based distribution and with no costs, with respect for them as autonomous individuals.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank the Ministries of Health from Malawi and Zimbabwe for their support of this study, the communities where data was collected for hosting our research, the participants who contributed to the study and the research teams from the two countries. Thanks to Professor Elizabeth Corbett and Professor Frances Cowan for their support and comments and to Dr. Melissa Neuman for designing the household surveys. The study was undertaken in collaboration with UNITAID, Population Services International, WHO, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, and the rest of the HIV Self-Testing Africa (STAR) Consortium. Two networks of researchers in STAR contributed to the discussion and inter-country analysis: the qualitative research network and the economics network and we are grateful for their insights and implementation perspectives.

Contributors

PPI, ELS, MDE and FTP designed the DCE study. PI, ELS, MKK, LJN, and MT designed the qualitative study. PPI and ELS coordinated the studies. BR completed the literature review. PPI, MDE, and GM analyzed the DCE data, with FTP advising on the direction of analysis. PPI, ELS and MKK analyzed the qualitative data, with MT advising on the direction of analysis. PPI completed the first draft of the manuscript with writing contributions by ELS, MDE, MKK, BR, and LJN. FTP and MT critically revised the manuscript. All authors approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Table 1. Attributes and levels for discrete choice experiments

Preference by domain	Malawi		Zimbabwe	
	Attribute	Levels	Attribute	Levels
Product characteristics	<i>Test price</i>	Free, 50 Malawian kwacha, 150 Malawian kwacha	<i>Test price</i>	Free, 50 cents, \$1
	<i>Sample collection method</i>	Oral-fluid self-test, Blood-based self-test, Provider-delivered blood-based test		
Provider characteristics	<i>Type of provider</i>	Health care worker, Lay distributor, Intimate partner	<i>Provider age</i>	≤30 years old, >30 years old
			<i>Provider residence</i>	Same community, Outside of community
Service delivery characteristics	<i>Location</i>	Health facility, Mobile clinic, Home, Home of distributor	<i>Location</i>	Health facility, Mobile clinic, Home
	<i>Pre-test support</i>	Instruction leaflet, Hotline, In-person, Hotline and in-person	<i>Pre-test support</i>	Instruction leaflet, Hotline, In-person
	<i>Post-test support</i>	Instruction leaflet, Hotline, In-person, Hotline and in-person	<i>Opening hours</i>	Regular hours, Regular hours plus evenings and weekends
			<i>Batched or individual distribution</i>	Batch distribution, Individual distribution

Table 2. Background characteristics for participants 16-25 years old

	In-depth		Focus group				Discrete choice			
	interviews		discussions				experiments			
	Malawi		Malawi		Zimbabwe		Malawi		Zimbabwe	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Sex										
Male	7	46.7	10	43.5	37	44.0	90	36.7	48	50
Female	8	53.5	13	56.5	47	56.0	155	63.3	48	50
Age [median (IQR)]	20	(18, 21)	20	(19, 23)	21	(19, 23)	20	(18, 23)	20	(17, 22)
Education										
No formal schooling	2	13.3	0	0	0	0.0	21	8.6	1	1
Started or completed primary school	11	73.3	13	56.5	6	7.1	168	68.6	22	22.9
Started or completed secondary school	2	13.3	10	43.5	78	92.9	54	22	71	74
Tertiary	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	0.8	2	2.1
Employed with regular salary	2	13.3	10	43.5	N/A	N/A	3	1.2	12	12.5
Married	7	46.7	12	52.5	35	41.7	134	54.7	37	38.5
Ever tested for HIV	7	46.7	14	60.9	N/A	N/A	190	77.6	69	71.9
Total	15	100	23	100	84	100	245	100	96	100

Table 3. Estimation of young people’s preferences for HIVST delivery – multinomial logistic regressions

A. Model I (MNL – Malawi)

B. Model II (MNL – Zimbabwe)

	Coefficient		St. Err.		Coefficient		St. Err.
Product characteristics				Product characteristics			
<i>Test price</i>	-4.874	***	0.440	<i>Test price</i>	-1.691	***	0.480
<i>Sample collection method</i>							
Oral-fluid self-test	0.082		0.062				
Blood-based self-test	-0.025		0.057				
Provider-delivered blood-based test	-0.057		0.096				
Provider characteristics				Provider characteristics			
<i>Type of provider</i>				<i>Provider age</i>			
Health care worker	0.037		0.053	< 30 years	0.012		0.036
Lay distributor	0.085	*	0.050	> 30 years	-0.012		0.036
Intimate partner	-0.122	*	0.068	<i>Residence of provider</i>			
				Same community	0.070		0.054
				Outside of the community	-0.070		0.054
Service delivery characteristics				Service delivery characteristics			
<i>Location of distribution</i>				<i>Location of distribution</i>			
Health facility	-0.140	*	0.081	Health facility	-0.030		0.078
Mobile clinic	-0.170	***	0.065	Mobile clinic	-0.669	**	0.275
Home	0.350	***	0.080	Home	0.699	**	0.301
Home of distributor	-0.040		0.065				

<i>Pre-test support</i>				<i>Pre-test support</i>		
Instruction leaflet	-0.096		0.065	Instruction leaflet	-0.049	0.105
Hotline	0.024		0.068	Hotline	0.039	0.110
In-person	-0.024		0.064	In-person	0.010	0.067
Hotline and in-person	0.096		0.080	<i>Hours of operation</i>		
<i>Post-test support</i>				Regular hours	0.078	0.070
Instruction leaflet	-0.141	**	0.068	Regular hours plus evenings and weekends	-0.078	0.070
Hotline	-0.014		0.064	<i>Batch or individual distribution</i>		
In-person	0.126	**	0.062	Individual distribution	-0.018	0.036
Hotline and in-person	0.002		0.075	Batch distribution	0.018	0.036
Neither^a	-1.760	***	0.100			
Neither ^a * never tested	-0.013		0.098			
AIC	2706.7			AIC	1149.30	
LLF	-1337.4			LLF	-565.63	
N	245			N	96	

^a Neither represents the status quo alternative

* is significant at p-value < 0.10, ** is significant at p-value < 0.05, *** is significant at p-value < 0.01

Effects coding used for categorical variables.

Table 4: Key findings on preferences and triangulation of methods

Preferences by domain	Key qualitative themes	DCE results	Triangulation results
Product characteristics	<p>Malawi: 3 FGDs, 15 IDIs</p> <p>Zimbabwe: 9 FGDs</p>	<p>Malawi: n=245</p> <p>Zimbabwe: n=96</p>	
	<p>There were strong preferences for HIVST kits to be offered free of charge across methods and countries.</p>	<p>Setting the price of HIVST kits as low as US\$0.10 would reduce uptake among users in both countries. Compared to other attributes, price mattered most in Malawi.</p>	Consistent
Provider characteristics	<p>FGD participants in both countries often mentioned the benefits of oral testing compared to blood-based testing, though with some skepticism around accuracy. Self-testing in general was viewed very positively in the FGDs and IDIs across contexts.</p>	<p>Young people in both countries revealed no strong preferences regarding the sample collection method.</p>	Consistent
	<p>In both methods and countries, there was an expressed lack of trust in health care providers and a preference for lay community distributors. Young people in the Malawi FGDs and IDIs also mentioned preferring peer distributors. In</p>	<p>In Malawi, there was a preference for lay community distributors and dislike for distribution through intimate partners. In Zimbabwe, participants had no strong</p>	Complementary

	Zimbabwe, participants preferred distributors that were from the same communities.	preferences regarding the age and residence of providers.	
Service delivery characteristics	Young people in the FGDs and IDIs in both settings were in favor of home-based distribution of HIVST kits for reasons of convenience.	Location was one of the strongest drivers of demand in both countries, with access to HIV testing at home highly valued.	Consistent
	FGD and IDI participants in Malawi seemed more open to collecting HIVST kits from local clinics, mobile clinics or community gatherings. Some young men in the Zimbabwe FGD also wanted the choice of picking up kits at these locations.	Distribution of HIVST kits through mobile clinics was strongly disliked in both countries. In Malawi, health facilities were almost as strongly disliked as the mobile clinic model. This was not significant in Zimbabwe.	Contradictory
	Young people across methods and contexts were motivated by the confidentiality and control afforded by HIVST. They also mentioned liking the availability of in-person support as long as they could conduct the tests themselves.	Participants in both countries were indifferent to the level of pre-test support given by providers. However, in terms of post-test support, in-person assistance was preferred in Malawi.	Complementary
	There were mixed views regarding batch distribution of kits to the household in the Malawi and Zimbabwe FGDs. Some young people were	Young people in Zimbabwe were indifferent to batch distribution of HIVST kits to the entire household.	Complimentary

	concerned that acceptance of an HIVST kit in front of family members would reveal that they were sexually active, while others found it as a way to discreetly take a test.		
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Supplemental Data File (.doc, .tif, pdf, etc.)

Appendix 1a - DCE scenario exercises - Malawi.png



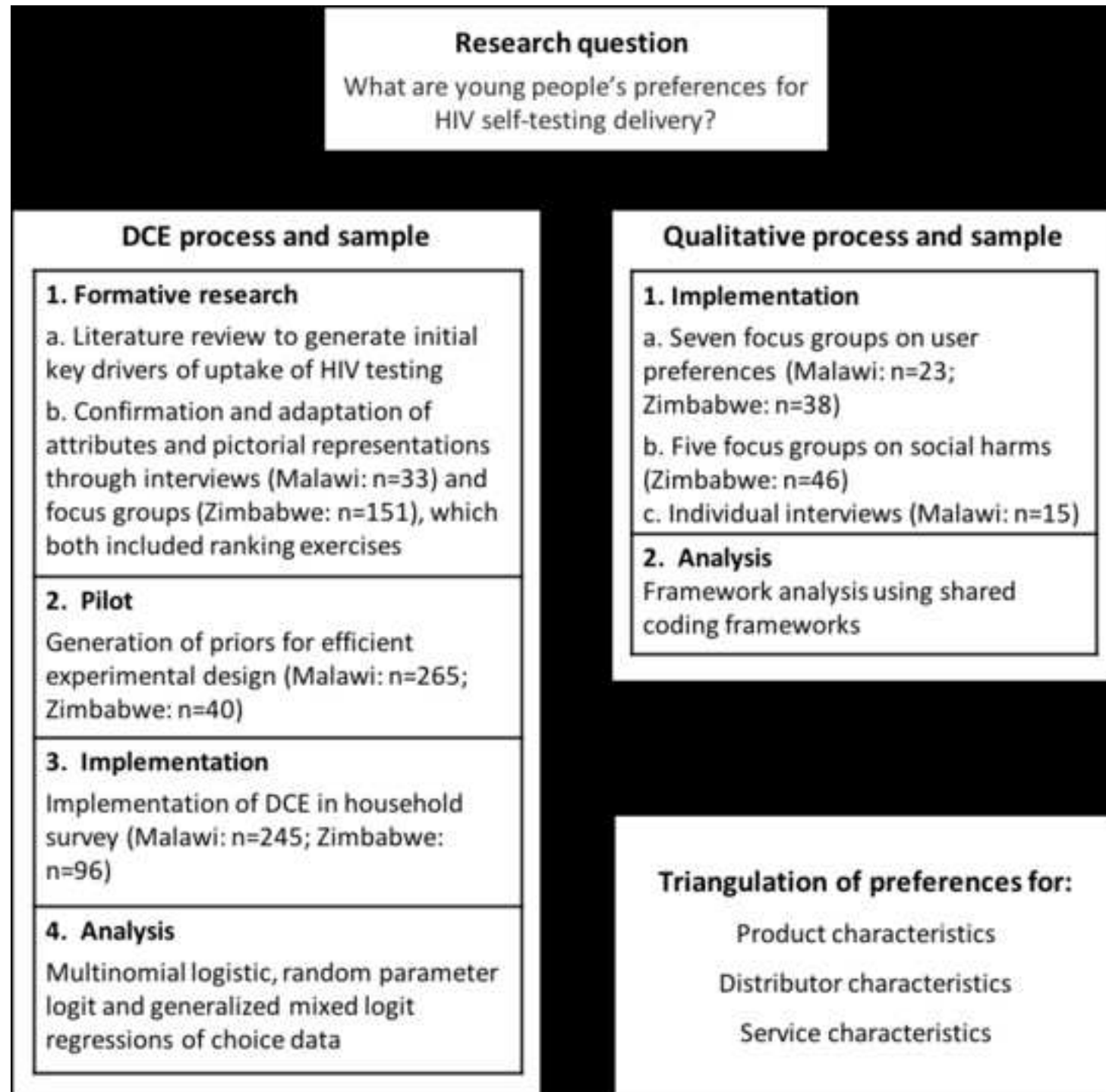


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Appendix 1b - DCE scenario exercises - Zimbabwe.png

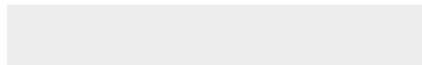


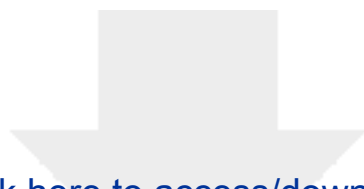




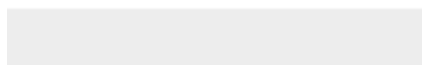
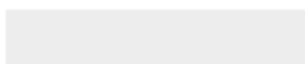
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“I will choose when to test, where I want to test”: Investigating young people’s preferences for HIV self-testing in Malawi and Zimbabwe

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Running head: HIV self-testing preferences for among young people

Word count: 3753 words

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Funding source: This work is supported by UNTAID, grant number: PO#8477-0-600.

Abstract

Objectives

This study identifies young people's preferences for HIV self-testing (HIVST) delivery, determines the relative strength of preferences and explores underlying behaviors and perceptions to inform youth-friendly services in southern Africa.

Design

A mixed methods design was adopted in Malawi and Zimbabwe and includes focus group discussions (FGD), in-depth interviews (IDI) and discrete choice experiments (DCE).

Methods

This study was conducted during the formative phase of cluster randomized trials of oral-fluid HIVST implementation. Young people aged 16 to 25 years were purposively selected for IDIs (n=15) in Malawi and 12 FGDs (n=107) across countries. A representative sample of young people were administered a DCE on HIVST delivery, with data analyzed to estimate relative preferences for service characteristics. The qualitative results provided additional depth and were triangulated with the quantitative findings.

Results

There was strong concordance across methods and countries, with key preferences categorized into three domains: product, provider and service characteristics. HIVST was highly accepted by young people, if provided at no or very low cost. Young people expressed mixed views on oral-fluid tests, weighing perceived benefits with accuracy concerns. There was an expressed lack of trust in health

providers and preference for lay community distributors. HIVST addressed youth-specific barriers to standard HIV testing, with home-based distribution considered convenient. Issues of autonomy, control, respect, and confidentiality emerged as key qualitative themes.

Conclusion

HIVST services can be optimized to reach young people if products are provided through home-based distribution and at low costs and with respect for them as autonomous individuals.

Key words: HIV self-testing, preferences, adolescents, young people, discrete choice experiments, Malawi, Zimbabwe

Introduction

Young people aged 15-24 years account for a third of people with HIV in sub-Saharan Africa and a third of new infections worldwide [1]. HIV testing among this population remains disproportionately low compared to adults, with uptake even lower among adolescents aged 15-19 years [2, 3]. Late HIV diagnosis, delays in antiretroviral therapy (ART) initiation and poor adherence to treatment has resulted in poor clinical outcomes among this age group [4-7].

Young people experience unique barriers to standard HIV testing services (HTS) that contribute to low coverage of HIV testing. Individual and household-level barriers include perceptions of low risk of HIV infection, emotional burden of dealing with a positive test result and absence of support from family and friends [8, 9]. On a community and health-systems level, stigma around HIV testing in communities, fear of disrespect by health care providers, concerns over confidentiality and issues of parental or guardian consent can prevent young people from accessing HTS [8-12]. Young people are also rarely financially independent and therefore disproportionately affected by actual and perceived costs of accessing services [8, 11].

HIV self-testing (HIVST), the process in which a person collects his or her own specimen, performs the test and interprets the results, is now recommended as an additional approach by the World Health Organization [13]. This approach has potential for reaching young people and overcoming some of the barriers associated with HTS [14]. Key motivations for young people in sub-Saharan Africa to self-test include greater confidentiality, privacy, convenience and the perception that oral-fluid self-test kits are easy to use [15-18]. Compared to other age groups, adolescents aged 16-19 years old had the highest uptake of HIVST when delivered to communities in urban Malawi [19]. While young people appear to have an interest in HIVST, research on their

preferences for HIVST delivery – specifically around product, provider and distributor characteristics – is limited. A greater understanding of young people’s preferences is needed to inform and develop optimal youth-friendly HIVST strategies that will facilitate uptake of testing and linkage to prevention and treatment.

Methods

A mixed methods design was used to identify young people's preferences for how HIVST should be delivered; to determine the relative strength of preferences; and to explore behaviours and perceptions that may underlie preferences. Figure 1 details the tool design and data collection process and how the methods supported and built on each other and ultimately provided a comprehensive framework for understanding preferences. Focus group discussions (FGD) explored group perceptions and in-depth interviews (IDI) aimed to gain more insight into sensitive issues and create an environment for people to disclose previous testing and HIV status. Discrete choice experiments (DCE), a method for measuring stated preferences for goods or services, were informed by the qualitative research and provided a quantitative estimate of preferences [20-22]. By asking people to choose between alternative bundles of HIVST delivery characteristics, choice data can be analyzed to understand key drivers of demand.

Data collection

This research was nested within the formative phase of a series of parallel cluster randomized trials of community distribution of oral-fluid self-test kits (OraQuick® HIV Self-Test) under UNITAID/PSI Self-Testing Africa (STAR). The formative studies and trials aimed to inform and evaluate country-specific programming, resulting in different research designs and sampling methods. Studies were guided by intercountry research questions, which enabled analyses to be

conducted across contexts despite differences in designs. The qualitative studies and DCEs were conducted between April to September 2016 in Malawi (Blantyre, Machinga, Mwanza, and Neno districts) and Zimbabwe (Mazowe district). Ethical approvals were obtained from the College of Medicine Research Ethics Committee in Malawi, the Medical Research Council of Zimbabwe and the Research Ethics Committee of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

For the IDIs and FGDs, topic guides across the two countries aimed to elicit views on barriers and facilitators to HIV testing, values and preferences for HIVST and perceptions around social impacts from HIVST. Participants, aged 16-25 years, were recruited from communities undergoing pilot HIVST implementation. In Malawi, residents who had self-tested were purposively sampled to ensure representation by women and men and whether or not they had previously tested for HIV. Participants in Zimbabwe were similarly sampled by sex as well as whether or not they had self-tested. In total, 15 IDIs and three FGDs (n=23) were conducted in Malawi and nine FGDs (n=84) were administered in Zimbabwe. IDIs and FGDs were conducted in local languages, audio-recorded, and transcribed and translated into English.

Emerging themes from the qualitative data, as well as findings from a literature review and ranking exercise with qualitative participants on HIV testing characteristics relevant to each country, informed the DCE design process (Fig. 1), which adhered to standard guidelines [23]. The DCEs consisted of a set of scenarios, each comprised of two alternative approaches for delivering HIV testing (Appendix 1). The Malawi DCE also included the option to select the status quo. Pictorial representations of these scenarios were developed to facilitate comprehension of the alternative services. Using prior parameters generated from a pilot, we created an unlabelled d-efficient

design, considered leading practice [24], in *Ngene* (version 1.21.1, ChoiceMetrics Pty Ltd, Australia) to identify the fewest number of choice sets for estimating all parameters [25].

The DCEs were nested within larger population-based household surveys conducted at baseline in Malawi and after pilot distribution in Zimbabwe under the respective cluster randomised trials (see hivstar.lshtm.ac.uk). Households from enumeration areas were first randomized to the survey; household members aged 16 years or older were eligible. Consenting participants in Malawi who had a recent negative test or did not know their HIV status were randomized to the DCE. In Zimbabwe, the first 300 eligible participants were given the DCE regardless of HIV status. Participants were randomly allocated to one of 40 sets of six choice scenarios using an electronic tablet-based questionnaire in Malawi and one of two sets of nine choice scenarios using a paper-based questionnaire in Zimbabwe. Interviewers explained the attribute levels (Table 1) and illustrations and provided a demonstration of the oral-fluid self-test before participants were asked to select their preferred service for each scenario. Sample size was calculated using the rule of thumb by Johnson and Orme [26], suggesting a minimum sample size of 170 in Malawi and 110 in Zimbabwe. Given our focus on young people, we only analyzed choice data from participants aged 16-25 years. While this sample (n=245 in Malawi and n=96 in Zimbabwe) was sufficient for estimating strength of preference for the attribute levels, it did not allow for robust estimation of variation in preferences between sub-groups of young people.

Data management and analysis

The qualitative data, while informing the DCE design, were analyzed as an independent data source to provide additional depth in understanding preferences and reflect the breadth of enquiry. A framework analysis was used to deductively generate themes around user preferences, including

product, provider and service characteristics, and inductively construct themes that arose frequently from the data in both countries [27]. Intercountry coding frameworks were developed and emerging themes were identified through collaborative analysis of the field notes and collected data and in-person discussions of researchers and implementers. Transcripts were coded in *NVivo* (version 10, QSR International, Burlington, Massachusetts, USA) by one researcher in each country, with an independent coder checking a proportion of transcripts for inter-coder reliability. Data were analyzed to ensure that commonalities or differences between individuals and groups as units were visible.

DCE data were cleaned using *Stata Statistical Software* (version 14, StataCorp, College Station, Texas, USA). Utilities (U), representing the strength of relative preferences, were estimated for each country using discrete choice models in *Nlogit*. Choice data, elicited from the choice made between the service alternatives, were first analyzed using a multinomial logistic model as a basic model. Random parameter logit (RPL) and generalised mixed logit (GMXL) models were then introduced to respectively allow for unobserved preference heterogeneity in addition to scale heterogeneity [28]. Effects coding was used for attribute levels, which were categorical except for price. Three common attributes were included across countries that could be directly compared: price of kit, point of distribution, and level of pre-test support.

Key preferences elicited from the DCE and qualitative data were categorized into the following domains: 1) product features such as price and specimen collection method; 2) provider characteristics including occupation; and 3) service attributes for example the location of distribution. Findings within each of these categories were triangulated across methods and

classified as consistent, complementary (if providing more depth or a different perspective), or contradictory.

Results

Background characteristics of DCE and qualitative participants are detailed in Table 2 and reflect representation among young people across sex, education, employment status, marital status and prior HIV testing. Most participants were women and had previously tested for HIV. In comparison to Malawi, more young people in Zimbabwe had higher education levels, were employed with a regular salary, or were unmarried.

In this section, we present the DCE and qualitative results around preferences for product, provider and service delivery attributes followed by the triangulation results. Estimates generated from the MNL, RPL and GMXL models were largely robust across models (Appendix 2). The gamma and tau parameters, which test for unobserved and scale heterogeneity, were highly insignificant for the GMXL model ($p=0.94$ in Malawi and $p=0.78$ in Zimbabwe for both parameters). The MNL estimator also had the lowest Akaike's Information Criterion values, meaning this model was the best fit for our data. In Table 3, we present the MNL estimates in detail. The results from the method triangulation are shown in Table 4, with the qualitative analysis providing additional depth in explaining the strength of preference as well as identifying important divergent views and concerns among young people.

Product characteristics

For the DCE, price had a very strong influence on testing choices in both Malawi ($U=-4.874$, $p\leq 0.01$) and Zimbabwe ($U=-1.691$, $p\leq 0.01$). The strength of these preferences can be interpreted

relative to changes in other attribute levels. For example, an increased price of USD 0.10 in Malawi would lead to a utility loss of -0.487. Including another attribute level with an equally large but positive utility could compensate for the effect of such a price increase. In Malawi, the DCE did not identify any significant preferences between the specimen collection methods (e.g., oral fluid self-test, blood-based self-test, and provider-delivered blood-based test).

The FGD and IDI results in both countries revealed that HIVST kits should be no to very low cost, with price acting as a barrier to testing. In Malawi, this was seen to be particularly important for those who were not working or financially dependent on their families. In terms of the self-testing product, young people across countries saw it as an innovative technology and appreciated the ability to control the testing and disclosure process.

I will choose when to test, where I want to test, and I can determine how private the place of testing is... 19-year-old man, FGD, Zimbabwe

While there was strong consensus in FGDs around self-testing, views around performance and accuracy of the different specimen collection methods diverged. Participants expressed that they were more accepting of oral-fluid tests than older people and talked about benefits such as ease-of-use, flexible point of access, and painless specimen collection compared to finger prick for blood-based testing. There was, however, the perception that blood-based tests were more accurate, a view held more strongly in FGDs in Zimbabwe than Malawi as expressed here:

Many said [oral-fluid tests were not] reliable because ... the virus is in the blood. So many were not satisfied with this self-testing. 16-year-old woman, FGD, Zimbabwe

When the results were triangulated across the DCE and qualitative methods, preferences for product characteristics were found to be consistent, with participants desiring for HIVST kits to be free of charge or very low cost. Preference between the different specimen collection methods was also similar: no strong preferences were revealed in the DCEs and the qualitative findings were mixed, with stated benefits of oral-fluid self-tests offset by concerns around accuracy.

Provider characteristics

In Malawi, young people preferred to obtain an HIVST kit from a minimally-trained community distributor ($U=0.103$, $p\leq 0.05$) to a trained health care worker ($U=0.037$, $p>0.10$) or intimate partner ($U=-0.122$, $p\leq 0.05$). Meanwhile, participants in Zimbabwe were indifferent to the age group of providers and whether they came from the same community. Each of these provider attributes were country-specific and could therefore not be compared across settings.

FGD and IDI participants in both countries felt that HIVST would motivate young people to test in settings characterised by distrust in health workers to convey the correct results and keep information confidential. There was a stated preference for lay community distributors, though there were some concerns raised in the Malawi FGDs around their counseling qualifications. Further, participants in Zimbabwe expressed desire to have distributors residing in the same village and available if needed. In Malawi, youth peer groups were also suggested as important conduits for supporting young people.

The DCEs and qualitative results provided complimentary insights on preferences for provider characteristics. Young people's preferred distribution of HIVST kits by lay community distributors across methods, with the qualitative research also revealing a lack of trust of HCWs. The

Zimbabwe DCE did not reveal any strong preferences regarding the residence of distributors, which departed from some of the findings from the qualitative data.

Service delivery characteristics

In terms of location of distribution, the DCE results revealed that access at home was favoured in Malawi ($U=0.350$, $p\leq 0.01$) and Zimbabwe ($U=0.699$, $p\leq 0.05$). This was preferred over mobile clinics, which had a negative preference (Malawi: $U=-0.170$, $p\leq 0.01$; Zimbabwe: $U=-0.669$, $p\leq 0.05$), and health facilities (Malawi: $U=-0.140$, $p\leq 0.10$; Zimbabwe: $U=-0.030$, $p>0.10$).

Compared to other characteristics, these attribute levels were some of the most important drivers of demand for young people. Participants across countries were indifferent to the level of pre-test assistance, which included instruction leaflets, telephone hotlines and in-person support. Other attributes relating to service delivery were explored separately in each country. In contrast to being indifferent to approaches for pre-test support, participants in Malawi preferred in-person assistance following self-testing ($U= 0.126$, $p\leq 0.05$) rather than just the instruction leaflet ($U= 0.141$, $p\leq 0.05$). In Zimbabwe, participants did not have strong preferences for other service delivery characteristics, including hours of operation and distribution of batches of HIVST kits to the entire household.

In the FGDs and IDIs, young people appreciated the convenience and savings in time and transportation costs associated with home distribution of HIVST kits.

I thought it wise to go for [self-testing] when ... introduced in this community, so I decided to test because I had access... I was not supposed to walk a distance for testing. 23-year-old man, IDI, Malawi

Accessing HIVST and taking the test at home was also seen to provide greater privacy and encourage action among those who had procrastinated over testing. In both countries, where HIV testing and treatment services were often offered in the same location within health facilities, some participants felt people were afraid of being seen. Compared to Zimbabwe, participants in Malawi were more open to collecting kits from local clinics, mobile clinics or even community gatherings. There was also the view that hospitals ensured better safe-keeping of testing devices. In Zimbabwe, a minority of young men in an FGD reported wanting the autonomy of collecting the HIVST kit from a mobile or local clinic as this gave them more control over when to test, illustrated here:

I say no to a fixed date that they decide to come; I won't want it [the test kit] at that time.

So if I collect at the clinic it is good; I will go and collect from the clinic when I want to.

19-year-old man, distribution FGD, Zimbabwe

Despite some concerns about confidentiality, availability of in-person support was highly favoured by participants from both countries and balanced this conflict by suggesting that '*The counselor must be there but not during the entire process*'. Providers were viewed as important in offering information and preparing users for dealing with HIV positive results. Most participants were against using a hotline, citing the value attached to in-person dialogue especially for post-test support.

Young people in both IDIs and FGDs expressed that they were starting to become more independent, make decisions for themselves and, at the same time, were exploring their sexuality and boundaries, leading to some clashes in household dynamics, including decision-making about testing. In one FGD in Zimbabwe, young people said they disliked when community distributors spoke to their parents without consulting them directly despite being above the age of consent.

Further, there were mixed views on whether kits should be given individually or distributed in ‘batches’ to the household. While some young people worried that parents could deduce whether they were sexually active by their decision to accept a kit, others found it better if kits were offered to the whole household so no attention was placed on the young person’s choice. The reverse was also brought up with participants in both countries, mentioning that coercion of young people to test may be more likely to occur in situations where distribution was batched.

Evaluating the results from the DCE with the qualitative results, home access of HIVST was consistently preferred across methods. In contrast, FGD and IDI participants in Malawi were open to distribution through health facilities and mobile clinics, which differed from the DCE results. DCE participants in Malawi preferred more comprehensive support beyond the instruction leaflet after self-testing. This was also reflected in the qualitative research, where young people wanted the option of accessing in-person support if needed. In the Zimbabwe DCE, there were no strong preferences for batched distribution of HIVST kits, which complemented the mixed findings from the qualitative research.

Discussion

This is the first study to explore young people’s preferences for HIVST in Malawi and Zimbabwe and comes at a time when many countries are starting to scale-up HIVST as an additional approach to reach untested populations [13]. We found that HIVST is highly acceptable to young people in these countries as it empowers them to choose the location and timing of the test and disclosure around their results. Young people were attracted by the innovative new technology and appreciated the decision-making autonomy and control it gave them at a time of life when they were becoming more independent from their parents and more sexually active. Young people liked

the convenience, confidentiality and perceived ease-of-use. Across the qualitative and DCE results, young people felt strongly that HIVST should be free and distributed at home, with some form of in-person support available if needed.

The high acceptability of HIVST has been described among young people in other settings in sub-Saharan Africa [15, 29, 30], however, these studies provide limited information on young people's preferences around HIVST delivery characteristics. Previous studies have largely reported that oral-fluid tests were appealing because they were easy to use, painless and did not require a blood sample [15, 16, 31]; although a study in Tanzania reported dislike for this method due to lack of familiarity [32]. Our study pointed to concerns by young people around accuracy of oral-fluid tests, a finding that has previously been cited in the United States [17, 18]. HIVST programmes promoting oral-fluid tests will need information about their functioning and accuracy to address these concerns. Given young people's low liquidity and strong aversion to price, the findings also show that uptake of HIVST may be limited if kits are not provided for free or at extremely low prices.

Young people's strong preferences for home delivery of self-test kits and some in-person support by community providers contrasted with the desire for total privacy. Home-based testing offered a way for young people to overcome issues of access and visibility associated with facility-based HTS [8, 9, 11, 33, 34, 35]. Meanwhile, availability of in-person support was reported as being important if additional information or assistance was required in the case of a positive test. In Kenya, preference for post-test support was found to be more pronounced among young people than adults [15]. This may be particularly important for young people, since studies suggest that

linkage to care for this population has been sub-optimal in the contexts of home and community-based HIV testing in Kenya and South Africa [36, 37].

Being empowered to control one's own HIV testing process seems to be particularly appealing to young people [38]. As they transition from childhood to adulthood, they are given or demand greater autonomy and independence. Being responsible and taking charge of one's own life and health motivates young people to test for HIV [8, 11, 39], which resonates with our findings that empowerment and control act as motivators for young people to test. Confidentiality was the main reason why young people preferred HIVST [15, 16]. Young people's lack of trust of health workers and desire for confidentiality has been described elsewhere [11, 33, 40, 41] and motivated young people's preference for HIVST in this study. Our study also shows preference for lay community distributors, with on-going pilot studies under the STAR Consortium confirming this in practice [42, 43]. In Kenya, where home-based HIV testing by lay counsellors has been successful [39, 44], the integration of HIVST onto existing community health platforms could become a model for HIVST in the future. In the context of a gap between biological and psychosocial maturity, as well as discrepancies in cultural and social and legal definitions of maturity, promoting HIVST in young people may not be without conflicts, including denied or forced testing. Appropriate training of distributors and sensitization of parents and the wider community would therefore be needed.

There were a number of limitations to our study. The DCE and qualitative research were nested within country-specific cluster randomized trials of community-based HIVST implementation, resulting in distinctive research designs and sampling methods in each country. Despite this, results were largely consistent and complementary. Sample size calculations for the DCE were based on the total population and did not provide enough degrees of freedom to robustly examine differences

in preferences among sub-groups of young people. Although participants were asked about preferences for oral-fluid and blood-based self-tests, none had seen a blood-based self-test, which may have influenced stated preferences for oral-fluid tests.

Our study adds to the evidence on preferences for HIVST delivery among young people, with potential implications for reducing current testing gaps among this hard-to-reach age group. Uptake of HIVST among young people is most promising if distribution of test kits is convenient, that is provided through home-based distribution and with no costs, with respect for them as autonomous individuals.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank the Ministries of Health from Malawi and Zimbabwe for their support of this study, the communities where data was collected for hosting our research, the participants who contributed to the study and the research teams from the two countries. Thanks to Dr. Melissa Neuman for designing and managing the household surveys and Professor Elizabeth Corbett and Professor Frances Cowan for their support and comments. The study was undertaken in collaboration with UNITAID, Population Services International, the WHO and the HIV Self-Testing Africa Research (STAR) Consortium. Two networks of researchers in STAR contributed to the discussion and inter-country analysis: the qualitative research network and the economics network and we are grateful for their insights and implementation perspectives.

Contributors

PI, ELS, MDE and FTP designed the DCE study. PI, ELS, MKK, LJN, and MT designed the qualitative study. PI and ELS coordinated the studies. BR completed the literature review. PI, MDE, and GM analyzed the DCE data, with FTP advising on the direction of analysis. PI, ELS and MKK analyzed the qualitative data, with MT advising on the direction of analysis. PI completed the first draft of the manuscript with writing contributions by ELS, MDE, MKK, BR, and LJN. FTP and MT critically revised the manuscript. All authors approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Table 1. Attributes and levels for discrete choice experiments

Preference by domain	Malawi		Zimbabwe	
	Attribute	Levels	Attribute	Levels
Product characteristics	<i>Test price</i>	Free, 50 Malawian kwacha, 150 Malawian kwacha	<i>Test price</i>	Free, 50 cents, \$1
	<i>Sample collection method</i>	Oral-fluid self-test, Blood-based self-test, Provider-delivered blood-based test		
Provider characteristics	<i>Type of provider</i>	Health care worker, Lay distributor, Intimate partner	<i>Provider age</i>	≤30 years old, >30 years old
			<i>Provider residence</i>	Same community, Outside of community
Service delivery characteristics	<i>Location</i>	Health facility, Mobile clinic, Home, Home of distributor	<i>Location</i>	Health facility, Mobile clinic, Home
	<i>Pre-test support</i>	Instruction leaflet, Hotline, In-person, Hotline and in-person	<i>Pre-test support</i>	Instruction leaflet, Hotline, In-person
	<i>Post-test support</i>	Instruction leaflet, Hotline, In-person, Hotline and in-person	<i>Opening hours</i>	Regular hours, Regular hours plus evenings and weekends
			<i>Batched or individual distribution</i>	Batch distribution, Individual distribution

Table 2. Background characteristics for participants 16-25 years old

	In-depth		Focus group				Discrete choice			
	interviews		discussions				experiments			
	Malawi		Malawi		Zimbabwe		Malawi		Zimbabwe	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Sex										
Male	7	46.7	10	43.5	37	44.0	90	36.7	48	50
Female	8	53.5	13	56.5	47	56.0	155	63.3	48	50
Age [median (IQR)]	20	(18, 21)	20	(19, 23)	21	(19, 23)	20	(18, 23)	20	(17, 22)
Education										
No formal schooling	2	13.3	0	0	0	0.0	21	8.6	1	1
Started or completed primary school	11	73.3	13	56.5	6	7.1	168	68.6	22	22.9
Started or completed secondary school	2	13.3	10	43.5	78	92.9	54	22	71	74
Tertiary	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	0.8	2	2.1
Employed with regular salary	2	13.3	10	43.5	N/A	N/A	3	1.2	12	12.5
Married	7	46.7	12	52.5	35	41.7	134	54.7	37	38.5
Ever tested for HIV	7	46.7	14	60.9	N/A	N/A	190	77.6	69	71.9
Total	15	100	23	100	84	100	245	100	96	100

Table 3. Estimation of young people’s preferences for HIVST delivery – multinomial logistic regressions

A. Model I (MNL – Malawi)				B. Model II (MNL – Zimbabwe)			
	Coefficient		St. Err.		Coefficient		St. Err.
Product characteristics				Product characteristics			
<i>Test price</i>	-4.874 ***		0.440	<i>Test price</i>	-1.691 ***		0.480
<i>Sample collection method</i>							
Oral-fluid self-test	0.082		0.062				
Blood-based self-test	-0.025		0.057				
Provider-delivered blood-based test	-0.057		0.096				
Provider characteristics				Provider characteristics			
<i>Type of provider</i>				<i>Provider age</i>			
Health care worker	0.037		0.053	< 30 years	0.012		0.036
Lay distributor	0.085 *		0.050	> 30 years	-0.012		0.036
Intimate partner	-0.122 *		0.068	<i>Residence of provider</i>			
				Same community	0.070		0.054
				Outside of the community	-0.070		0.054
Service delivery characteristics				Service delivery characteristics			
<i>Location of distribution</i>				<i>Location of distribution</i>			
Health facility	-0.140 *		0.081	Health facility	-0.030		0.078
Mobile clinic	-0.170 ***		0.065	Mobile clinic	-0.669 **		0.275
Home	0.350 ***		0.080	Home	0.699 **		0.301
Home of distributor	-0.040		0.065				

<i>Pre-test support</i>				<i>Pre-test support</i>		
Instruction leaflet	-0.096		0.065	Instruction leaflet	-0.049	0.105
Hotline	0.024		0.068	Hotline	0.039	0.110
In-person	-0.024		0.064	In-person	0.010	0.067
Hotline and in-person	0.096		0.080	<i>Hours of operation</i>		
<i>Post-test support</i>				Regular hours	0.078	0.070
Instruction leaflet	-0.141	**	0.068	Regular hours plus evenings and weekends	-0.078	0.070
Hotline	-0.014		0.064	<i>Batch or individual distribution</i>		
In-person	0.126	**	0.062	Individual distribution	-0.018	0.036
Hotline and in-person	0.002		0.075	Batch distribution	0.018	0.036
Neither^a	-1.760	***	0.100			
Neither ^a * never tested	-0.013		0.098			
AIC			2706.7	AIC		
LLF			-1337.4	LLF		
N			245	N		
				96		

^a Neither represents the status quo alternative

* is significant at p-value < 0.10, ** is significant at p-value < 0.05, *** is significant at p-value < 0.01

Effects coding used for categorical variables.

Table 4: Key findings on preferences and triangulation of methods

Preferences by domain	Key qualitative themes	DCE results	Triangulation results
Product characteristics	<p>Malawi: 3 FGDs, 15 IDIs</p> <p>Zimbabwe: 9 FGDs</p>	<p>Malawi: n=245</p> <p>Zimbabwe: n=96</p>	Consistent
	<p>There were strong preferences for HIVST kits to be offered free of charge.</p>	<p>Setting HIVST kits at prices as low as US\$0.10 would reduce uptake among users. Price matters most in Malawi.</p>	Consistent
Provider characteristics	<p>Young people often mentioned the benefits of oral testing compared to blood-based testing, though with some skepticism around accuracy. Self-testing in general, however, was viewed very positively.</p>	<p>Young people revealed no strong preferences regarding the the sample collection method.</p>	Consistent
	<p>There was an expressed lack of trust in health care providers, and a preference for lay community distributors. Young people in Malawi mentioned preferring peer distributors.</p>	<p>In Malawi, there was a preference for lay community distributors and dislike for distribution through intimate partners. In Zimbabwe, participants were indifferent to the age and residence of providers.</p>	Complementary

Service delivery characteristics	Young people were in favor of home-based distribution of HIVST kits for reasons of convenience.	Location was the strongest driver of demand in the DCE, with access to HIV testing at home highly valued.	Consistent
	Participants in Malawi seemed more open to collecting HIVST kits from local clinics, mobile clinics or community gatherings. Some young men in Zimbabwe wanted the choice of picking up kits at these location, feeling that home-based distribution undermined their autonomy around testing.	Distribution of HIVST kits through mobile clinics was strongly disliked. In Malawi, health facilities were almost as strongly disliked as the mobile clinic model. This was not significant in Zimbabwe.	Contradictory
	Young people were motivated by the confidentiality and control afforded by HIVST. They also mentioned liking the availability of in-person support as long as they could conduct the tests themselves.	Participants were indifferent to the level of pre-test support given by providers. However, in terms of post-test support, in-person assistance was preferred.	Complementary
	There were mixed views regarding batch distribution of kits to the household. Some young people were concerned that acceptance of an	Young people in Zimbabwe were indifferent to batch distribution of HIVST kits to the entire household.	Complimentary

	HIVST kit in front of family members would reveal that they were sexually active, while others found it as a way to discreetly take a test.		
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