The Representation of HIV/AIDS in the Media and its Impact among Young People in Namibia: a study of Windhoek and Katima Mulilo

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INTRODUCTION

The HIV/AIDS pandemic remains one of the greatest health challenges facing the world today. By 2006, a total of 39.5 million people worldwide were living with the virus. In that year too, the number of new infections rose to 4.3 million: 400,000 more than in 2004 (UNAIDS, 2006). The challenges seem even more insurmountable for African countries – including Namibia – which face other socioeconomic problems. Since the first reported case of the virus in Namibia in 1986, the number of those infected had increased to an estimated 230,000 by the end of 2005. The virus is prevalent among young people between the ages of 15 and 49 – the most sexually and economically active segment of the country’s population.

The latest figures indicate that an estimated 14.2 percent of young people between the ages of 15 and 24 live with HIV (Ministry of Health and Social Services, 2007). The loss of young adults in their most productive years has been “one of the most severe consequences of the disease” (Kiai, 2000:37).

It is against this backdrop that concerted efforts were initiated in terms of preventing the further spread of the virus. This entailed mass education to make people aware not only of the dangers of HIV, but also how to avoid contracting it. One of the instruments in the education drive is the media. According to Kiai (2000: 38), the mass media attract great interest because they are perceived as powerful and influential tools.

Approaches to HIV/AIDS prevention in Namibia have been largely informed by the ABC concept: Abstain – Be faithful – Condomize. The primary aims of this kind of approach, according to Kiai (2000: 41), are to encourage those whose HIV/AIDS status is negative to retain their status, and to encourage those who are HIV-positive to be careful not to spread the virus and to maintain hope through positive living. The approach places great importance on disseminating information on health risks, based on the premise that once people are aware of how to protect themselves, this awareness will influence them to change their behaviour.

However, despite mass education to make people aware not only of the dangers of HIV, but also how to prevent it, some studies indicate inconsistency in behaviour change patterns among young people. Jones (2006) points out that, by 2004, only limited progress had been made on achieving behaviour change among the youth in areas where HIV/AIDS is widespread. In addition, Gallant and Maticka-Tyndale, 2004 (cited in Jones, 2006) reviewed eleven school-based HIV reduction programmes for African youth in several African countries. They found that the programmes were generally unable to effect a change in sexual behaviour for older youth.

In Namibia, a study by Mchombu (2000:145) found that although high AIDS awareness among the youth has been achieved, there is limited adoption of safe sexual behaviour: condom use is low, and incidences of teenage pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are high. Tjingaete (2000) also found that, despite the study by the Namibian Network of AIDS Service Organisations (NANASO) on knowledge, attitudes and sexual practice among the youth which showed that 80 percent of young Namibians were aware of HIV/AIDS transmission, the rate of infection continued to double every 2 years.

However, other research attests to the fact that HIV prevention methods appear to be working, resulting in self-reported changes in behaviour among young people (UNICEF, 2003). Another study found that the
is as important as the ideas and meaning they project (Lyons, 2000).

Thus, research was needed to understand why there has been limited achievement in terms of consistency in behavioural change, and how the media and young people have contributed to this pattern of behaviour change. It is within this context that this research was conducted, i.e. to find out, amongst other things:

1. How is HIV/AIDS represented?
2. To what extent does HIV/AIDS representation in the media influence a change in behaviour among young people?
3. How do young people interpret and make sense of HIV/AIDS messages and incorporate them into their lifestyle?
4. To what extent do young people’s interpretations of HIV/AIDS messages influence their behaviour?
5. What are the gender differences in the interpretation and usage of HIV/AIDS messages?

This study was needed in order to assist in improving existing HIV communication initiatives aimed at behaviour change.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The research objectives were as follows:

1. To examine the nature and pattern of HIV/AIDS representation in the media.
2. To investigate how young people interpret HIV/AIDS messages and incorporate them into their lifestyle.
3. To examine gender differences in the interpretation and usage of HIV/AIDS.
4. To establish the impact of HIV/AIDS representation in the media on behavioural change among young people.
5. To establish the impact of young people’s interpretations of HIV/AIDS messages on their behaviour.
6. To make recommendations on how the media can influence behaviour change.

The study focused on young people in Katima Mulilo and Windhoek. The two areas were chosen for their socioeconomic differences; it was thought that, in order to get a balanced view of the audience interpretation of HIV/AIDS messages, it was needed to have a sample that was representative of young people from different spectra of society. Thus, the reason for the selection of Katima Mulilo and Windhoek.
THE REPRESENTATION OF HIV/AIDS IN THE MEDIA

Windhoek is the capital and largest city of Namibia. It is located in the Khomas Region which has the lowest number of poor people. The region had a Human Poverty Index (HPI) of 17.0, suggesting that 17 percent of the population suffered some sort of deprivation (UNDP 2000: 29 cited in Caprivi Regional Poverty Profile, 2006: 1). The city has a population of approximately 230,000. Windhoek is well developed compared to other towns in Namibia and in comparison to Katima Mulilo; Windhoek is by far more developed in terms of infrastructure and development in general. Most businesses and organizations have their head offices in Windhoek. All foreign flights operate to and from Windhoek. The city also has a high concentration of the media.

Katima Mulilo is a town that serves as the administrative centre and capital of the Caprivi Region of Namibia. The region is one of the poorest regions in Namibia; it had an HPI of 36.0 (which means that 36 percent of the population suffered some sort of deprivation) which is higher than the national average of 24.7 percent for the whole country (UNDP, 2000: 29; cited in Caprivi Regional Poverty Profile, 2006: 1). Katima Mulilo has a population of approximately 22,000. The town is a gateway to four countries – Angola, Botswana, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The town is divided into Katima Urban and Katima Rural. Te majority of the population of the town live in Katima Rural.

The study aims to provide insight into how the representation of HIV/AIDS in the media may impact the audience’s interpretation of the intended messages and, consequently, whether the audience change their behaviour as a result of those messages. These findings will assist the media and communicators to devise better communication strategies that may help in mitigating the spread of the virus.

The study was limited by time and resource constraints. Additionally, the non-probability sampling method used in gathering data means that the studies cannot be generalized to a larger population. Furthermore, the method used for data collection has some disadvantages in that some participants’ responses could have been influenced by other participants. Other limitations were that, during data processing and analysis, there could be other unknown aspects that were not detected and were, thus, left out of the final report.

This study had two main assumptions:

1. Audience interpretations of HIV/AIDS determine how receptive they are to the messages, and

2. The way HIV/AIDS is represented in the media may help in explaining why audiences have been reluctant to change their behaviour.

LITERATURE REVIEW: HIV/AIDS AND THE MEDIA

This section provides a review of the literature related to the topic under study. This review includes the representation of HIV/AIDS issues in the media and the theories used to guide the study.

The media have been instrumental in creating public awareness about HIV/AIDS. Through sustained reporting on an issue, the media help set the agenda for public discussion on particular issues. However, studies show that the media in Namibia are failing in their duty to be agenda-setters (Media Tenor, 2005). This is because the local media’s coverage of HIV/AIDS is generally low, superficial, and not detailed enough to create the necessary impact in terms of awareness and behaviour change (Mchombu, 2000:144). This assertion is also reflected in findings by Media Tenor (2005) which found that less than 1.35 percent of media articles analysed during September 2004 and March 2005 dealt with HIV/AIDS.

Young people are the ones most affected by and infected with HIV. Therefore, awareness campaigns are aimed at reaching young people. There are several factors, such as alcohol and drug abuse and peer pressure, that make young people vulnerable to HIV/AIDS. Another important factor, according to studies by Witte (1992:227), is that while adolescents and young adults know about AIDS and how to prevent it, their perceived invulnerability to the virus may cause them to disregard the threat. Against this background, the media can play an important role by highlighting issues affecting young people and clarifying some of the misconceptions that arise. According to the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF, 2002), this can be effectively done by having young people living with the virus share their experiences, as they are in a strategic position to reinforce information on the need to maintain safe behaviour. Additionally, they can assist in reducing stigma by showing that the virus can affect anyone.

However, a study by Mchombu (2000: 145) found that one of the weaknesses of the Namibian media is that it is adult-controlled. Thus, young people are not given an opportunity to ‘state their case’, which he believes leads to frustration and refusal to comply with the suggested (dictated) behaviour.
The media more often than not also tend to highlight high-risk groups and behaviour when reporting on HIV/AIDS issues (Insideout Research, 2003). By doing so, the media guide public thinking towards a division between ‘us’ and ‘them’. This is known as othering: the practice of situating oneself outside the risk of HIV/AIDS while labelling others. If this is left unchecked, those groups who do not consider themselves at high risk can fall prey to the tendency to ignore risk and to scapegoat the ‘other’ (ibid.). Citing previous research in South Africa, the Insideout Research (ibid.) study further states this kind of representation not only leads to the stigmatization of groups and misrepresentation of women in particular, but also fails to convey the importance of behaviour change.

People living with HIV/AIDS (‘PLWHA’) can play an active role in creating awareness about HIV/AIDS. The Insideout Research (ibid.) study found that a huge gap existed between the lived experience of many people and how their lives were actually reflected in the print media. Witte (1992: 175) argues that HIV-positive young people can become excellent spokespersons to promote safer behaviour as they may increase feelings of susceptibility among the same population group. The way the media represent PLWHA may also affect how effective they are in trying to raise awareness. Additionally, there is a need for gender balance: both males and females need to be given coverage. A study in Namibia found gender disparities with regard to the coverage of PLWHA. The voices of female PLWHA in the Namibian media were found to be totally missing; men constituted 100 percent of all those living with HIV quoted by the media (Brown and Xoagus-Eises, 2005).

The media have an important role to play in creating an informed public, sensitive to the cause, spread and prevention of HIV/AIDS. This is important for stemming the spread of the virus (Boafo and Foreman, 2000: 10). An example comes from a study by Tulloch among 178 students (1992:123) cited in Lupton (1994: 10–11) which investigated audience response to an episode of the Australian television series, A Country Practice, in which a young girl contracts HIV after sharing a hypodermic needle with an HIV-positive drug user. The study found that the episode had a significant effect on students’ awareness of needle sharing as high-risk behaviour for HIV infection. As a result of their role in awareness creation, the media play a key role in the construction of public understanding of HIV/AIDS because people shape their beliefs about health and illness from the discourses and constructions that are available to them (Lyons, 2000).

However, there is a need to be conscious of how the audience interacts with the media because audience responses to the messages and meanings disseminated in the media are of major importance in understanding the construction of AIDS-related knowledge (Lupton, 1994: 4). Studies carried out on how media messages are received show that audiences are not passive recipients but are actively involved in interpreting such messages and attaching their own meanings to them. A study by Obregón (2005) of how young viewers related to health messages dealing with HIV/AIDS and sexuality issues in two commercial Colombian soap operas found that certain effects of the message were felt by the audience, but that there was also an ongoing process of negotiation and reinterpretation of meanings from the messages. He concluded that viewers negotiated meanings of health issues, and that the viewers reported attitudinal and behavioural changes.

From the discussion it appears that the media and the personal experience of the audience together make it inevitable that they are both influential in the development and subsequent shaping of lay health beliefs. In other words, Lupton (1994: 4) concludes that what is responsible for shaping people’s health beliefs are health education programmes in concert with interpersonal communication and personal experience. Therefore, understanding the effects of HIV messages calls for a critical examination of the representation of AIDS in the media and how the audience’s interpretation of such messages influences behaviour change (Lupton, 1994: 4).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The current study was guided by the following theories:

1. The encoding and decoding model is influenced by the semiological approach to media analysis. It is a combination of the idea of media power and the idea that the audience is both active and constrained in making sense of media messages (Casey, 2002: 19). There are three positions taken by the audience during the process of decoding. The preferred meaning involves the audience’s interpretation of the text, which may reflect the assumptions and intentions of the producers. If the preferred meaning is accepted then
the text can be seen as instrumental in influencing the audience. However, during the process of decoding, the preferred meaning may not be reproduced. Second is the negotiated reading or interpretation, in which the audience may accept the preferred meaning of the text but not the other (the producer’s intended meaning). In other words, some aspects of the text maybe accepted by the audience while others are rejected. Last is the oppositional reading, in which the audience is able to understand the preferred meaning of the text but rejects it. This model places emphasis on the audience in the process of constructing meaning based on an analysis and interpretation of the text.

2. The interpretative model is based on the premise that the audience ‘filters’ media messages. Not only do people use the media in different ways, they also attend to and receive media messages in “a selective way, ignoring, reacting to, forgetting or reinterpreting according to their viewpoints” (Hiebert, Ungurant and Born, 1988: 493). During the process of interpretation, filtration takes place (the process through which audiences eliminate the useless, the annoying and the unwanted) (Fourie, 1998: 11).

The basic sets of conditions that impact on the audience’s ability to filter messages include:

Psychological filters: every audience member has a personality based on individual experiences that may make him or her intellectually and emotionally selective regarding the communication process. They define other people, situations and events. It can be said that such filters are ‘eyes’ through which people see situations and events, etc.

Linguistic Filters - This is where the audience has the basic ‘linguistic sets’ needed to decode the message, or has the ability to understand the language. (Hiebert, Ungurant and Born, 1988:493). Therefore, if the audience does not understand the language used in HIV/AIDS messages, they cannot utilize those messages.

Informational filters - allow the audience to understand and assimilate the information presented, “without accurate information filters, no positive communication occur. If you cannot decode the message, you cannot communicate” (Hiebert, Ungurant and Born, 1988: 493).

3. The use and gratification theory regards the audience as active consumers of media messages. It seeks to understand how the audience uses the media. According to this theory, audiences have a choice of texts from which they choose to satisfy their needs. These needs include personally identifying meaning: “Audiences are able to compare their lives with the lives of characters and situations on television to explore and reaffirm or question their personal identity” (Fourie, 1998: 12). As a result, audiences influence their media experience because they consume mediated products based on the needs they have (Lull, 1995: 90).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

For this study, both qualitative and quantitative methodologies were employed. The justification for using the quantitative methodology is that it follows strict rules and procedures which diminish bias on the part of the researcher. This methodology is appropriate for content analysis. In contrast, the qualitative methodology was used because it is holistic in nature and, thus allows understanding of the whole phenomenon by discovering, capturing and interpreting the meanings of respondents. It allows the researcher to collect in-depth information from respondents. It was also suitable for focus group discussions, therefore. Data collection involved three methods, namely content analysis, focus group discussions and questionnaires.

Content Analysis

Content analysis requires “detailed, objective and systematic observation of verbal or symbolic communication” (Agnew and Pyke, 1987:85). Since the study involved analysis of newspapers, content analysis was seen as appropriate because it is a research technique used for the “scientific study of speeches, records and other written communications to determine key ideas, themes, words, or the message contained in the record” (Adam and Schvaneveldt, 1991; cited in Mchombu, 2000:134). A media content analysis was conducted using a sample of New Era and The Namibian, two of the most widely read newspapers in Namibia. New Era is the Government-owned newspaper, while The Namibian is privately owned. Both publish predominantly in English. The content analysis was conducted from 1 March to 30 May 2007. These three months were chosen as they were preceded by the adoption of the first-ever national policy on HIV/AIDS in Namibia.
Focus Group Discussions and Questionnaire

The focus group discussions method was selected as it gives the respondents an opportunity to express their views in their own words, and provides further insight specifically into how they interpret media representation of HIV/AIDS. It also enables the collection of in-depth information. The study involved eight focus group discussions with young people from Windhoek and Katima Mulilo aged between 15 and 24, and took place during June and July 2007. There were four all-male groups and four all-female groups. The groups were comprised of same-sex members to make sure participants were comfortable about expressing themselves freely. Due to time limitations, only two articles and two posters were used for the focus group discussions. After reading the articles and posters, group members were encouraged to discuss their impact. The discussions were open and informal, and respondents were encouraged to converse rather than simply respond to questions. The researcher avoided leading the discussions by introducing imposing words or terms that would influence the participants. The discussions each lasted 2 hours and were audiotaped. A questionnaire was also distributed prior to the discussions to obtain a profile of the participants.

Research Sample

For the content analysis, no sampling method was used. All copies of the two newspapers produced during the period of study were analysed. Additionally, due to the small number of articles (47) on HIV/AIDS, all articles were considered for analysis. For the focus groups, non-probability sampling was used. Availability sampling was used, whereby every unit available to the sample is selected. This sampling method was used as it is less time-consuming and can be employed in the absence of a sampling frame. The disadvantage of this method is that data may not be representative of the target population. However, the research provided useful insights into how young people interpret HIV/AIDS representations in the media and in social marketing materials. Additionally, it provided the basis on which further research can be done with a more representative sample. The research targeted young people between 15 to 24 years of age as a unit of analysis, since they are the most affected by and infected with HIV/AIDS. Other units of analysis were individual editions of the selected newspapers (The Namibian and New Era) and locally produced HIV/AIDS social marketing materials.

Ethical Issues

One of the ethical issues that might arise in this research was confidentiality. In order to minimize these concerns, respondents were informed of the purpose of the study from the outset so that they could make informed decisions about taking part in the research. Furthermore, respondents were assured of utmost confidentiality telling them that they did not have to identify themselves in any way that might link them to the study.

Data Processing and Analysis

The collected data were then processed, which involved checking for errors, inconsistencies and distortions. For the content analysis, tables were used. Since facts cannot speak for themselves, the next step was to interpret the findings and ascribe meaning to them. The qualitative data from focus group discussions were then organized into themes to find patterns and trends. The researcher also used the words stated by the respondents as quotes. Finally, the findings were compared to previous studies and theories.

FINDINGS

Data from Newspaper Coverage

This section presents the findings of the content analysis of the New Era and The Namibian newspapers. The content was analysed in order to obtain a general impression of the nature and pattern of HIV representation in the mainstream media. It also provided general guidance for the focus group discussions. This report includes the number of articles that covered HIV/AIDS during the study period, as well as an analysis of some key HIV issues that were perceived to be important to this study and which were dealt with in the focus group discussions.

Table 1 indicates the number of articles carried by the two newspapers in question from March to April 2007. Of the 120 editions examined, 49 carried HIV/AIDS-related articles, representing 41 percent (of all articles). The New Era carried slightly more articles (57 percent) than The Namibian (43 percent). March had the highest number of HIV/AIDS-related articles.
This can be attributed to the launch of the national HIV/AIDS Policy on 19 March 2007. April was second with 12 articles. May carried the lowest number of articles (11). The total of 49 HIV/AIDS-related articles during a three-month period indicates a reasonably high coverage of such issues by the media.

Table 2 above indicates the frequency of various categories of HIV/AIDS-related articles. Most articles contained more than one content category. The results show that HIV causes received 11 percent of coverage in New Era and 5 percent in The Namibian. Prevalence received the highest coverage in New Era (18 percent) while 10 percent of articles in The Namibian covered this aspect. Treatment received a fair amount of coverage: 14 percent in New Era and 5 percent in The Namibian. The articles on treatment were mainly about the increase in the number of PLWHA on anti-retroviral therapy (ART). An article in the 20 April 2007 edition of The Namibian reported that, of the 339 prisoners known to be HIV-positive, only 110 were on ART. The interesting factor relating to this was a parliamentary debate on whether condoms should be distributed to prisoners. This raises debate as to whether government should continue not distributing condoms to prisoners when only a few of the prisoners can be on ART.

Testing had one of the highest frequencies of coverage by The Namibian (14 percent). One article in the 13 April 2007 edition of The Namibian quoted President Hifikuipune Pohamba saying that the number of pregnant women going for testing had increased from 10 percent 5 years ago to the current 90 percent. This report suggests more people are being tested for HIV. However, articles did not stress the importance of encouraging people to go for voluntary counselling and testing; this is important as people who are aware of their HIV status are in a better position to know how to protect themselves or, if positive, know how to live positively with the virus. Counselling received coverage only in New Era (4 percent).
The category *High-risk groups/behaviour* also received considerable coverage: 11 percent in *New Era* and 14 percent in *The Namibian*. The category *Other* included articles related, among others, to HIV/AIDS research, funding, etc. These issues received 4 percent in *New Era* and 43 percent in *The Namibian*, indicating that this category had the overall highest frequencies.

The *Prevalence* category received the second highest coverage of all categories in both papers, namely 14 percent. *Prevalence* was reported as part of all other content categories except for one article, namely in the 18 April 2007 edition of *New Era*, which reported on the 2006 Namibian Sentinel Survey. The survey gives an indication of the state of the HIV/AIDS situation in the country, whether or not the country is making progress in the fight against the disease. The article stated that despite multifaceted HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns involving the media, such campaigns appeared to have fallen on deaf ears as the prevalence ratio among pregnant women had actually increased slightly.

Only *New Era* covered the *PLWHA* category, and all its articles in this category except one were local. Contrary to the Insideout Research (2003) study, which found that there was a huge gap between the lived experience of many people and the print media’s reflections of their lives, the results show that the *New Era* articles focused on the lived experiences of PLWHA. For example, some faced discrimination: a PLWHA quoted in the 30 March 2007 issue said he could not get a job because of his HIV-positive status. Another article in the same edition talked of an elderly couple, aged 63 and 61, respectively, who were HIV-positive. They were referred to as possibly one of the oldest couples living with HIV/AIDS. This article may help in removing misconceptions that the elderly are safe from HIV.

The results also found that women PLWHA constituted 60 percent of those quoted. This is an improvement from previous research, which claimed that the voices of female PLWHA in the Namibian media were totally missing, as men constituted 100 percent of those quoted as living with HIV (Brown and Xoagusc-Eises, 2005).

The ABC approach to HIV/AIDS education places great importance on disseminating information on health risks, based on the premise that once people are aware of how to protect themselves, this awareness will influence them to change their behaviour (Lupton, 1994). This content category (*Awareness*) received fair coverage by the media: 10 percent in *The Namibian*, and 11 percent in *New Era*. The relevant story in the 11 May 2007 edition of *New Era* reported that Namibia had made good progress in providing young people in schools with HIV/AIDS education in that over 70 percent of the school-going youth had been reached through such programmes. However, the National Sentinel Survey (Ministry of Health and Social Services, 2007) shows that the age group 15–19 years recorded a slight increase in HIV prevalence, with the rate going up from 10.0 percent to 10.2 percent – prompting Government to call for intensified HIV/AIDS control measures. Thus, it appears that high levels of awareness and knowledge will not automatically spell changes in attitude or behaviour.

The category *High-risk groups/behaviour* was given fair coverage by the two newspapers. The high-risk groups cited in reports were prostitutes, truck drivers, fishermen and married women. On risky behaviour, *New Era* reported that prominent figures in society had sex with prostitutes and insisted on not using a condom. The study found that the articles focused on groups perceived as high-risk rather than on risky behaviour. According to Insideout Research (2003), this kind of representation not only leads to the stigmatization of the aforementioned groups, but also fails to convey the importance of behaviour change. It creates a misconception that certain groups are at more risk than others.

The *Stigma* category was covered in *New Era* but not in *The Namibian*. The relevant article on 19 March 2007 quoted the Democratic Turnhalle Alliance of Namibia (DTA) Member of Parliament, McHenry Venaani, as having said he would go for an HIV test to fight the stigma attached to the virus. There was also an article on 9 March 2007 about HIV positive people not wanting to make use of the available medicines because of a fear of stigmatization. This article, though not in-depth, is an example in how the media reported on the difficulties experienced by PLWHA. Reporting such issues may bring to the fore the issue of stigma and maybe measures can be put in place to combat it.

The *Other* category represented articles such as emerging issues in HIV/AIDS, research, funding, etc. This category received the highest coverage of all categories, representing 20 percent of all HIV/AIDS articles. The possible explanation as to why this category received a high frequency could be that new stories around HIV/AIDS maybe considered more...
newsworthy than ‘old’ issues. In other words, such issues appear to be viewed as more important by the media, hence the volume of coverage given to them.

The results of the content analysis show that HIV/AIDS issues received moderate coverage. This indicates an improvement on previous studies, which showed that coverage of HIV/AIDS in the media was low and erratic (Media Tenor, 2005; Mchombu, 2000). However, despite this improvement in coverage, the nature of coverage has not changed much: it is still superficial; most articles were news-oriented, i.e. reporting events or quoting sources; and there were few feature articles. Additionally, in support of Mchombu (2000: 144), the results show that the reporting of HIV/AIDS is mostly statistical in nature, as indicated in some of the content categories above. This superficial representation of HIV/AIDS issues may not provide sufficient detailed information to the reader, which lessens its impact in terms of awareness and behaviour change.

Data from Focus Group Discussions and the Questionnaire

The second part of the research involved focus group discussions. The research sought to understand how young people’s interpretation of the media representation of HIV/AIDS impacted on their behaviour. The discussions were preceded by a talk about what the youth knew about and what attitudes they held towards HIV/AIDS.

Table 3 indicates the number of participants by age and gender. There were 30 females and 29 males. The Windhoek groups comprised 15 females and 14 males, while the Katima Mulilo group involved 15 females and 15 males.

In terms of sexual behaviour, the findings show that a fair number of respondents are sexually active. Some 64 percent of the total participants said they were sexually active, compared with 36 percent who said they were not. Of the 64 percent who were sexually active, there were more males (68 percent) than females (46 percent). In Katima Mulilo, 55 percent of participants said they were sexually active, compared with 45 percent in Windhoek. Adult participants accounted for 61 percent of the sexually active, while teenagers accounted for 38 percent. The results show that, across all age groups, more males than females were sexually active.

Condom use (male condom) appears higher among the sexually active group. Some 50 percent reported that they always used condoms, compared with 26 percent who said they sometimes used condoms and 24 percent who said they never used condoms. The same number of males (13 percent) as females (13 percent) sometimes used condoms. However, more males (16 percent) than females (8 percent) did not use condoms. In general, those that used condoms said they did so to protect themselves from HIV/AIDS and unwanted pregnancies.

The research also found negative attitudes towards condoms. Some participants indicated that condoms interfered with sexual pleasure. Other findings indicated that condom use among some participants depended on the person with whom they had sex:

It all depends on whom you go chop. There is a nice saying in our language: “You drink from your own well”. So I will prefer to drink my water from my own well directly, without any of these things [condoms]. I would rather use a condom with a girl from clubs than with a person I call a fiancée.

(24-year-old Katima Mulilo male)

The respondents showed great awareness of HIV/AIDS in terms of its causes, transmission and prevention. The majority of the participants indicated the media as a major and reliable source of information. Other sources of information included New Start venues, clinics, hospitals and schools (libraries). School also proved to be a major source of HIV information for the teenage group. Family was also considered a reliable source.

Mchombu (2000: 145) found that one of the weaknesses of the Namibian media was that they are adult-controlled; thus, the youth are not given an opportunity to ‘state their case’, which Mchombu believes leads to frustration and a refusal to comply with the suggested (dictated) behaviour. In support of this view, the results show that many participants found the media helpful in creating awareness about the virus, but expressed dissatisfaction about how it represented HIV/AIDS issues.

Several said the messages were often repetitive and therefore failed to reflect some of the changes that had taken place in young people’s lives. Male participants
also felt that the media tended to portray men as solely responsible for spreading the virus:

I think females must also be blamed for that [spreading the virus] because it involves both ladies and men – it is not only men. You know your man or your boyfriend doesn’t want to use condoms; so why go for it? Why do you have sex with someone who doesn’t use a condom and you don’t know his status? (21-year-old Windhoek male)

Some participants condemned the use of cartoons in HIV/AIDS campaigns, saying it took away the seriousness of the message. Some stated that the use of healthy-looking people in media campaigns such as posters was not effective in fighting the virus. They argued that images of sick people would go a long way towards deterring people from engaging in risky sexual behaviour. They also felt the media failed to emphasize the consequences of the virus:

I think if one has to convince someone out there that there is something killing people ..., the pictures in the poster should be of those who are sick. How can you convince people while you draw pictures of people who are healthy? (23-year-old Windhoek male)

Analysis of Selected Articles

Article 1: “Sugar daddy wrecks girl’s life” (New Era, 28 March 2007)

This article was chosen to find out how the portrayal of a young person living with HIV can influence behavioural and attitudinal change among the youth.

The article is about a 24-year old HIV-positive woman, Risto Hilda Kasiku, who became infected after having a sexual relationship with a sugar daddy4. Kasiku was forced to leave school after she fell pregnant. Her son is now 3 years old. While Kasiku was still at school, she had a relationship with a stylish man, who lured her into having sexual intercourse in exchange for some “good promises”.

Participants were asked what they thought about the article. They believed that sugar daddies contributed to the spread of the virus. However, they showed sympathy for the young woman, saying that circumstances forced her to have a relationship with an older man. Most participants noted that the article was a clear indication of how young girls risked their lives by having sexual relationships with sugar daddies because of the desire for a luxurious life:

Despite everything they [relationships] fail, since sugar daddies are only there to use them and dump them. (24-year-old Windhoek male)

Asked who was to blame, male participants felt that while a man was to blame, the blame also lay with the woman, because “women like money”:

Our mothers and sisters must look for love, not money. (21-year-old Windhoek male)

Most female participants blamed the woman, because they felt that she had failed to heed the warnings against sleeping with sugar daddies. Other participants (both male and female) felt the woman could not be blamed because women were ‘weak by nature’, which made it difficult for them to say no:

The girl has nothing to do [with it] because it’s like; every girl is weak in mind, [in] body. If a person convinces her [about] many things she will just say “Yes”. (19-year-old Katima Mulilo male)

Men are good convincers. They can convince very easily and girls can be easily convinced. So she had no choice but to go for the sugar daddy. (23-year-old Katima Mulilo female)

The participants’ responses to the article appear to have altered their beliefs and attitudes towards HIV/AIDS. Some participants noted that the article helped them to acknowledge the existence of the virus. This is reflected in the following statement:

According to what I have read in this article, I’ve realized that AIDS exists – while we are always talking about AIDS and taking it as a joke. (20-year-old Windhoek female)

This comment supports the notion that the media play a key role in the construction of public understanding of HIV/AIDS, because people shape their beliefs about health and illness from the discourses and constructions available to them (Lyons, 2000).

The research indicates that exposure to the article appears to have affected participants’ attitudes towards PLWHA. Before reading the article, some participants had negative attitudes towards PLWHA and believed that they were responsible for spreading the virus:

How will we fight HIV/AIDS if those people who are infected live [another] 10 to 20 years?
The chances of them infecting other people increase. If they die in a short period, [all] the better. (21-year-old Katima Mulilo male)

However, after reading the article, most participants sympathized with Kasiku. They noted that there was a need for care and support for HIV-positive people. These findings reflect UNICEF’s (2002) assertions that showing young people living with HIV/AIDS and sharing their experiences can assist in reducing the stigma associated with it. Female participants noted that the article was helpful because it depicted a young person like themselves who was acting as a role model for them to change their behaviour. Several participants pointed out that the article showed the dangers and consequences of HIV/AIDS, and helped them to be more careful about protecting themselves from infection:

I should not engage … with a sugar daddy. It’s all about money, they will spoil us. We will end up [as] nothing but sounding bells, empty vessels. (22-year-old Katima Mulilo female).

It appears that, for young people at least, the representation of others their age sharing their experiences reinforces the message to maintain safe behaviour (UNICEF, 2002).

Article 2: “Steady relationships are safer” (New Era, 21 May 2007)

The article quotes the Minister of Information and Broadcasting, Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah, who stated that having a loving, caring relationship with only one partner could go a long way towards reducing the spread of HIV/AIDS in Namibia. The Minister was speaking at the launch of the Take Control ‘Safer and Better Relationships’ campaign. The objective of the campaign is to foster more open relationships that are based on trust and communication.

In terms of their responses to this message in the media, participants were asked what was meant by steady relationship. Most of them understood the term to mean a relationship in which two lovers were faithful to each other. However, when asked about their views on steady relationships, participants felt that steady relationships were not safe for the youth but were fine for the older generation:

When you compare the steady relations[hip] to the elders [older generation] not the young …, I think it works. They trust each other and they are safe. (21-year-old Windhoek female)

This belief is also reflected in what the majority of participants said during focus group discussions, where they included the elderly as the least likely to get infected with HIV. This indicates that the participants’ interpretation of the message was made within the context of the beliefs and attitudes held prior to their exposure to the message, which supports the related claim put forward by Corner (2000:388). Participants interpreted the article by drawing from their personal experience of steady relationships:

I know that betrayal is the oldest crime. A lot of people have been betrayed and that will also include me. I don’t believe that I will be willing to be a victim of betrayal again, so it’s better for me to trust myself and protect myself. (24-year-old Windhoek male)

Therefore, the findings show that some participants have a personality based on individual experiences that may influence or make them intellectually and emotionally selective regarding their interpretation process (Hiebert, Ungurant and Born., 1988:493).

Asked if they found the article helpful, most participants stated they did not find it helpful because they did not believe in steady relationships. They added that it was wrong for the media to write articles that promoted steady relationships and they should rather focus on promoting condom use and abstinence.

Participants’ rejection of the message on steady relationships correlates with the encoding and decoding model, which states that, during the process of interpretation, audiences may engage in oppositional reading: they are able to understand the preferred meaning of text, but reject it (Casey 2002: 83–84). In this case, the participants understood what steady relationships were, but did not believe they were safe – contrary to what was stated in the article. Additionally, the discussion shows that the audience filtered the message while interpreting it. Filtration entails eliminating the useless, the annoying and the unwanted (Fourie, 1998: 11). This is reflected in the participants’ rejection of the message in the article. However, a few participants argued that steady relationships may be useful in curtailing the spread of HIV. The following section is a presentation of findings from the focus group discussion on selected posters.

Poster 1: “Safe sex saves lives”
The poster is about a young man whose girlfriend is trying to convince him not to use a condom because it interrupts the sexual mood. However, the man succeeds in convincing his partner to use a condom. The poster was produced under the national Take Control campaign funded by UNICEF.

Several participants felt the poster depicted reality, i.e. the mood was indeed interrupted when a man stopped to put on a condom. However, some pointed out that saving their lives was the priority:

The mood can be interrupted, but you have to save your life. It’s not like the mood cannot be brought back again. (22-year-old Katima Mulilo female)

In contrast, several participants felt the poster did not reflect what happens in sexual relationships, arguing that men were usually the ones that disliked using condoms:

I’ve never seen a girl saying that using a condom would kill the mood. It only happens to some boys, because [they] don’t like using condoms. (22-year-old Windhoek female)

The way the participants interpreted the poster indicates that, as Casey (2002: 83–84) explains, they are engaged in negotiated reading or interpretation as they only accept some aspects of the texts while rejecting others: participants accepted that safe sex saved lives, but rejected the idea portrayed in the poster that young women requested their boyfriends not to use condoms.

Poster 2: “Alcohol invites risky sex”

The posters state that alcohol use invites risky sex. The poster urges readers to take control. The poster is also a Take Control campaign product. The campaign stakeholders involved Government, UNICEF, and the Coalition on Responsible Drinking (CORD).

Participants seem to have understood the message being conveyed in the poster and indicated that the message was clear:

When you are drunk you never know the person you are sleeping with and you never think about putting on a condom. (21-year old Katima Mulilo female)

Generally, participants were in agreement with the main message of the poster. This indicates that, as Casey (2002: 83–84) suggests, that their interpretation of the text reflects the preferred meaning or the meaning made by the producers of the poster – that alcohol invites risky sex. Male participants seemed to relate more to the poster than females, and thus made sense of it in terms of their prior experience of having sex under the influence of alcohol:

When drinking beer you feel like having sex just now [soon], because you won’t sleep without having sex. (17-year old Katima Mulilo male)

As Fourie (1998:12) explains, this indicates that, during interpretation, participants are also involved in comparing their own lives with those of the characters and situations in the material and messages, and so explore and reaffirm or question their personal identity. In contrast, although it appears the poster generalizes the risk of involved in having sex whilst drunk, some female participants – particularly those from Katima Mulilo – saw the message as being directed at males and, thus, distanced themselves from the message in their interpretation. They attached their own meaning to the message by stating it was a warning against having sex with a man who was drunk:

If you have a boyfriend who drinks, never have sex when he is drunk. Never, never do it. (20-year-old Katima Mulilo female)

Some participants noted that while the poster addressed the fact that alcohol invites risky sex, it failed to account for young people being drawn to risky sex. They felt that the impact of the poster would be greater if it had concentrated on the consequences of engaging in risky sex:

“Alcohol invites risky sex”: so what? And after the risky sex, what happens? (21-year-old Windhoek female)

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

The research was an attempt to examine the representation of HIV/AIDS in the print media and in social marketing initiatives, and the impact of such representations on behaviour change among young people in Windhoek and Katima Mulilo. The study also sought to find out how the audience’s interpretation of HIV/AIDS representations influenced behaviour change. This section comprises a discussion of the research questions, conclusions, questions for further research, and recommendations.
THE REPRESENTATION OF HIV/AIDS IN THE MEDIA

According to Boafo and Foreman (2000: 10), the role of the media involves educating the public about the importance of preventing the spread of HIV because an informed public, sensitive to the cause, prevention and spread of HIV, can help in stemming prevalence. However, the results of the media content analysis indicate that the nature of representation of HIV/AIDS issues in Namibia is superficial. According to Mchombu (2000:144), this kind of representation of HIV/AIDS issues may not provide enough detailed information in order to have the desired impact in terms of awareness and behaviour change.

In a nutshell, the research indicates that in-depth coverage of HIV/AIDS issues can have an impact on attitudes and behaviour. In particular, this is reflected in the discussion on the Kasiku article. However, as stated previously, the current representation of HIV/AIDS issues in the Namibian media indicates it may be difficult to attain this kind of impact.

The results also show that participants were able to understand the messages and explain them in their own words. This suggests that they possessed the necessary linguistic skills to be able to assimilate the media messages on HIV/AIDS (Hiebert, Ungurant and Born., 1988:493). The results also indicate that, during interpretation, audience beliefs and attitudes came to play a major role in their reception of HIV/AIDS messages. For instance, participants had negative attitudes towards steady relationships and, as a result, they processed the message to have negative connotations. Their attitudes seemed to have influenced their interpretation of the article. Additionally, during interpretation, participants constantly compared their daily life experiences with media representations. As Lull (1995:90) suggests, this indicates participants’ social experiences may have an impact in how they come to experience the media. Consequently, such comparisons may help in explaining how HIV/AIDS messages are incorporated into the audience’s lifestyles. The results suggest that such incorporation is not a straightforward process as it involves a negotiation between what the audience knows and what is being represented to them, in order to see how best they can fit the message into their lives. The results appear to support Obregón’s (2005) claim that the incorporation of HIV/AIDS messages into the lifestyles of young people is an ongoing process of negotiation and reinterpretation of meanings in the messages.

The study also sought to determine gender differences, if any, in the interpretation and usage of HIV messages. The results indicate that there were no major differences in gender interpretation of media messages. To a large extent, male and female participants shared similar views on the articles and posters. For instance, both male and female participants were of the opinion that a woman does not ask for unprotected sex. It appears, therefore, that participants shared similar social experiences with regard to issues of sexuality; these experiences in turn appear to have influenced their interpretation of the posters and articles. Both males and females drew from their personal experiences in order to interpret what was being represented. Thus, their interpretations were similar except in instances where they did not share experiences, as with the use of alcohol. These findings are in congruence with the social category perspective, which states that members of the audience are culturally linked and have a frame of reference in common (Hiebert, Ungurant and Born., 1988:493). Therefore, the response to a message will be similar, given that other conditions remain the same (ibid.).

Responses showed how media representations of HIV/AIDS, particularly the risks and consequences of HIV infection, may have an attitudinal and behavioural effect on young people. While these findings cannot be generalized to a larger population, the results seem to show that representations of HIV/AIDS issues may contribute towards influencing attitude and behaviour. Moreover, these self-reported effects occurred as a result of multiple exposures to messages in the posters and articles used in the focus group discussions. Therefore, prior exposure to other sources of information on HIV/AIDS may also play a part in reinforcing decisions to change behaviour. In support of Lupton (1994:4) the results suggest that both the media and the audience’s personal experience make it inevitable that they will be significant in influencing attitudinal and behaviour change.

The results indicate that, as Casey suggests (2002: 83–84), the audience’s interpretation of the message influenced their behaviour insofar as that interpretation reflected the preferred meaning of such message, i.e. that audience accepted its meaning as intended by its producer. The study shows that participants rejected media representations of HIV that did not depict their daily experience of events. While the media appear to play a role in behaviour change on the one hand, this may also depend on how the audience perceives the message, as their interpretation may influence how receptive they will be to the message. Thus, the results
support Obregón (2005), in that, during the process of reception of HIV/AIDS messages, audiences alternatively or simultaneously negotiated meanings relating to health issues and reported attitudinal and behavioural changes.

In conclusion, the results show that the way HIV/AIDS issues are represented in the print media and social marketing initiatives, particularly the risk and consequences of HIV infection, may have an impact on the attitudes and behaviour of young people. However, the results also show that the current representation of HIV/AIDS issues in the print media is mostly superficial; there appears to be hesitancy on the part of the media to do follow-up in-depth articles on the statistically oriented news stories. Hence, the media needs to follow up stories and provide a more analytical and in-depth side to the statistics, in order to give the audience something to think about and make them reflect on their behaviour and attitudes towards the disease. This may also act as a way of encouraging further debate among the audience on HIV/AIDS related issues. Consequently, the media may contribute in sustaining behavioural and attitudinal change.

The results also indicate that the audiences were not passive in their media experience: they are actively involved in constructing and attaching their own meanings to media messages. This appears to have been influenced by their personal experiences and their understanding of HIV/AIDS issues. It is worth mentioning that participants’ exposure to the articles and posters used in the study may not be solely responsible for the reported influence of HIV/AIDS messages on them. Other factors such as exposure to other sources of information on HIV/AIDS may have played a role in shaping the participants’ responses. Additionally, with regard to participants’ interpretations, there could be other socio-cultural factors apart from their personal experiences that may have influenced these interpretations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are made on the basis of this study:

1. Since the findings show that the media mostly depict PLWHA as being black and poor, the media should try to show PLWHA from diverse backgrounds to avoid creating the impression that HIV/AIDS affects only black, poor people.

2. The media and social marketing initiatives should find ways to involve PLWHA in order to encourage them to share their experiences, since the study showed they may assist in reinforcing maintenance of behaviour change.

3. Since the media play an important role in the construction of the public’s understanding of issues related to HIV/AIDS, they should provide in-depth coverage of issues such as voluntary counselling and testing (VCT) in order to encourage more people to seek VCT services.

4. The media and social marketing initiatives should address issues of sexuality in young people’s relationships in order to empower women to be more confident in negotiating safer sex.

5. Since the study shows audience receptivity may influence their media experience, social marketing initiatives should be conscious of the processes that are involved during the audience’s reception of HIV/AIDS messages, in order to influence behaviour change.

6. Since the study found showing people the consequences of risky behaviour may assist in reinforcing behaviour change, the media should highlight this aspect in its coverage of HIV/AIDS.

7. Since the study indicated not much attention was given to issues relating to the youth, the media need to reflect such issues as a way of encouraging the adoption and maintenance of behaviour change among the youth as well.

Notes

1. In this study interpretation refers to what meaning is constructed from media (HIV/AIDS) messages by the audience.

2. Representation in this study is defined as the construction in any medium (especially the mass media) of aspects of ‘reality’ such as people, places, objects, events, cultural identities and other abstract concepts; such representations may be in speech or writing as well as still or moving pictures (http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Modules/MC30820/represent.html).

3. Young people/the youth: persons between the ages of 15 and 24; the definition is based on the participants who took part in the research.

4. Sugar daddy in this study is defined as an older man who mostly uses his financial / or socio-economic status to lure a young girl to have a sexual relationship with him.
THE REPRESENTATION OF HIV/AIDS IN THE MEDIA

References


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Abstract

HIV/AIDS poses a serious challenge to Namibia’s socio-economic development. The virus affects the country’s most economically active segment: young people between the ages of 15 and 49. A number of communication campaigns have been carried out to mitigate the spread of the virus. This article reports on a study that examined the impact of media representations of HIV/AIDS on behaviour change among young people in Namibia. The study also sought to examine the extent to which the audience’s interpretations of these representations influenced their behaviour. The findings demonstrate the effects HIV/AIDS messages had on the participants. These include a process of reinterpretation, negotiation and rejection of some of the media representations of HIV/AIDS. The paper is based on a final year research project carried out at the Department of Information and Communication Studies, University of Namibia, in 2007.

Keywords: HIV/AIDS; media; youth; behavioural change; Namibia; Windhoek; Katima Mulilo

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MORE ON HIV/AIDS INFORMATION

ICT and AIDS literacy: a challenge for information professionals in India.


Purpose - The purpose of this paper is to describe the use of ICT to disseminate preventive health care information to combat the AIDS epidemic in India. The role of information professionals in various libraries and information centres and the challenges they are facing to increase HIV/AIDS awareness are discussed. Finally, recommendations are given and the conclusion is drawn that libraries and information professionals must develop AIDS literacy programmes to cater to the growing health information needs of the community. Design/methodology/approach - Literature search, web site information and personal interaction with the key persons associated with various HIV/AIDS awareness projects. Findings - Lack of knowledge about AIDS, its modes of transmission and ways to avoid infection, are major challenges in India. Staff in ICT-based library and information centres can make a high impact on the local community by developing community-based AIDS literacy programmes and hopefully save the society from an AIDS epidemic. There is a perceived need for providing health information services through public libraries to the illiterate rural population who are increasingly making themselves vulnerable to HIV/AIDS. However, awareness of e-channels is low, especially in rural India; one solution is to increase take-up and run AIDS awareness campaigns through electronic media. Originality/value - A summary is provided of ICT-based projects and initiatives by libraries and other agencies to disseminate AIDS information. Few multi-type consortia have been formed in the USA and UK to develop AIDS databases and e-learning modules are listed. These can be used as examples by Indian libraries with limited resources wishing to enhance community awareness through ICT. The concerted efforts amongst stakeholders are emphasized with the objectives of enhancing information professionals’ skill in the AIDS information dissemination process. (Author abstract)

(Selected by the Editor from Library and Information Science Abstracts)