

AUDIENCE PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES ON MEDIA COVERAGE OF HIV AND AIDS PANDEMIC IN LIMPOPO PROVINCE, SOUTH AFRICA

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—Abstract —

South Africa has the highest HIV and AIDS prevalence in the world despite the efforts by all stakeholders to mitigate its spread and start reversing the rate of new infections. It is also evident that the general public depend on the media for their information and educational needs concerning the disease. However, HIV and AIDS prevalence rate is still very high in Limpopo province. The HIV and AIDS incidence rate is equally high in South Africa, as well as in the Limpopo province. This study investigates audience perceptions and attitudes towards media coverage of the HIV and AIDS and factors fuelling the pandemic in the province. A detailed questionnaire was used to collect data from residents of Bochum in Capricorn District, Thohoyandou in Vhembe district, Phalaborwa in Mopani district, and Jane-Furse in Sekhukhune district of the Limpopo province. The study indicated that most residents in the province have positive perceptions about media coverage of the pandemic. In spite of the extensive media coverage, their attitudinal responses were not quite encouraging. The study highlighted that the major factors influencing audience attitudinal response to media coverage of the pandemic include: poverty, rape, Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs), alcohol and drugs, and unplanned teenage pregnancy. This study recommends that any HIV and AIDS mitigation strategy in the province should take into consideration

the aforementioned factors and that the media should consistently and adequately report on the pandemic as one of the development challenges of the province.

Key Words: *Newspaper coverage, attitudinal response, HIV and AIDS incident rate, determinants of HIV and AIDS pandemic*

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1. INTRODUCTION

In South Africa, the HIV and AIDS prevalence rate shows that the total number of persons living with HIV increased from an estimated 4,02 million in 2002 to 6,19 million by 2015 (Statistics South Africa, 2015). Currently, an estimated 11.2 percent of the total population is HIV positive. Statistics South Africa further highlights that one in 10 South Africans are living with HIV meaning that the number of people infected with the virus has increased by 2.17 million since 2002. This is largely due to the scale up of the Government's ARV treatment programme. There is still no cure for the disease. Ironically, the life-prolonging anti-retroviral drugs (ARVs) (though very much encouraged) is increasing the pool of infected people. "The reality in South Africa is that even with affordable and effective treatment available, new AIDS cases and death continue to occur at very high number after the HIV tide has been turned" (Whiteside, 2002; UNAIDS, 2016:1-9).

The 2007 South African HIV and AIDS policy and strategic frameworks clearly recognize the position of the media for effective efforts against this pandemic. The strategies are based upon a number of key guiding principles which include: "supportive leadership; effective communication; effective partnerships; promoting social change and cohesion" (South African National AIDS Council, 2007:12). South African Government also recognized the mass media as an effective tool in its comprehensive communication strategy for social and behavioural change communication, mobilization of all the stakeholders and achieving the National Strategic Plan (NSP) objectives and goals. (SANAC, 2012:58-59). In this context, this paper investigates public perception and attitudes towards mass media coverage of HIV and AIDS pandemic in Limpopo province, South Africa.

2. OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this study were to determine the perception of HIV and AIDS media coverage, to identify audience attitudinal response to HIV and AIDS news reports and to find out the determinants of HIV and AIDS pandemic in Limpopo Province of South Africa.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The media are actively involved in the construction of public understanding of HIV and AIDS. Individual and public beliefs about health and illness are formed from the discourses and constructions they are exposed to mainly through the media (McCombs, 2004), and to a lesser extent through other channels. As an important tool in the fight against HIV and AIDS, “media portrayals of HIV and AIDS and those affected by the disease can strongly influence public perception of the disease and risk’ because ‘it’s a relatively quick and inexpensive channel of disseminating important news” information (Pickle, Quinn and Brown, 2002). This can bring about the reversal of the already widely held stereotypes and prejudices about HIV and AIDS disease, influence the acceptance of the necessary attitudinal and behavioural changes, and ultimately contribute to the reversal of the pandemic.

Studies have shown that audiences are not passive recipients but actively interpret messages they receive and attach their own meanings to them (Chanda, Mchombu and Nengomasha, 2008). Thus, they are quite able to make up their own views or opinions on the quality and extent of mass media HIV and AIDS news reporting. As consumers of the media news items, such outcomes will also influence their responses to media HIV and AIDS contents and programmes (ibid.). In other words, perception of, and response to HIV and AIDS information from the media and other sources vary at individual and group levels depending on some factors. According to some studies, some of the factors that affect access and attitude to HIV information include poverty, level of educational attainment, misconceptions and stigma still associated with the disease (Wabiri and Taffa, 2013), socio-economic status (low and higher) (SES) (Viswanath, 2006) and gender (Magadi, 2013; Wabiri and Taffa, 2013; Fox, 2012). For instance. In South Africa, studies have shown that despite the high level of knowledge of HIV and AIDS among the youth, they contribute more to the current high incidence rate in the country by still not regarding themselves as vulnerable to the disease. Their attitudes and behaviour have generally remained unchanged with consistent high-risk behaviour despite several media campaigns executed by the Government and non-governmental agencies to halt further spread of the pandemic (Matsoso-Makhate and Wangenge-Ouma, 2009; Nupen and Wangenge-Ouma, 2009; Simbayi, Kalichman, Jooste, Cherry, Mfecane, and Cain, 2005).

Additionally, a study by Khoza (2011) shows that young people regarded HIV and AIDS campaigns as comprehensive because they convey simple, valuable and clear HIV and AIDS messages. However, they are convinced that nothing could be done to modify their sexual behaviour because human beings are ignorant by nature. Factors limiting the effectiveness of HIV and AIDS media campaigns among them were stated as their cynical attitudes, poor socio-economic factors, alcohol, drug abuse, peer pressure, and the love of money and material things (Khoza, 2011).

Citing Murdock (1998) in his study of South African media HIV and AIDS news agenda, De Wet (2004) states that “the media is the main source of information and explanations of social and political processes for most people.” However, while there were little information about the clinical, economic, human interest, community and cultural aspects of the disease, the political agenda was high above any other issue. A media evaluative study by Swanepoel, et al (2007) found that South African media partially follow the interest group guideline for HIV and AIDS reporting; their HIV and AIDS awareness raising efforts are satisfactory but their agenda setting needs improvement. Additionally, they tend towards sensational reporting and are unable to bring alternative angles to their coverage. The newspapers emphasize the victim image often and are inconsistent in the use of HIV and AIDS sensitive language. This type of reporting will leave the public with shallow and inaccurate knowledge of the disease, its various aspects, and issues around it. On the other hand, accurate and comprehensive knowledge of the disease will give understanding of the disease and hope to the general public, and help improve the success against the pandemic.

However, a survey of nearly 4,000 young South Africans on their attitudes towards the media role in HIV prevention and education shows that an overwhelming number of them (96%) think that the media are doing a good job communicating with the people on HIV and AIDS, and many of them (89%) reported personally taking action (including making positive choices about sexual behaviour) due to what they have learnt from the media (Kaiser Family Foundation and SABC, 2007).

4. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

This study was done in Limpopo Province of South Africa, and focused on the province's residents' perceptions and attitudes to South African media coverage of HIV and AIDS. Despite high HIV prevalence in each of the nine South Africa provinces, the last two South African's national HIV prevalence surveys (2008 and 2012), indicate an increase in HIV prevalence rate in Limpopo province from 8.8 percent to 9.4percent (Shisana, Rehle, and Simbayi, 2014:38). Also, few studies have focused on HIV-related issues in Limpopo province. The study area included Bochum in Capricorn District, Thohoyandou in Vhembe district, Phalaborwa in Mopani district, and Jane-Furse in Sekhukhune district. These areas were chosen by cluster sampling method (Baruch, 2007:112). Respondents were carefully selected by means of convenience sampling method (Du Plooy, 2007:114; Fouche and De Vos, 2003).

The questionnaire was administered to a total number of 120 community members from the four selected areas in Limpopo Province. This sought to capture and ascertain the public views (perceptions) on media contributions to the national HIV and AIDS mitigation efforts, as well as public attitudes towards HIV and AIDS media outputs. The questionnaire was first thoroughly pilot-tested with twenty Mankweng community members, in Polokwane Municipality. All necessary modifications were then made on the questionnaire before it was utilized in this study. The respondents completed the questionnaire properly and they were collected by the researcher and the four research assistants who were appropriately trained for this study. It was administered to selected households, residential homes, Police stations, schools and business offices. The data was entered into IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software and analyzed.

5. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

5.1 Perceptions about media coverage of the pandemic

Simple descriptive statistics was used to summarize and describe the data. This section presents the public perception of media promotion of HIV and AIDS prevention, management and eradication. The variables used for the assessment include stigmatization, HIV and AIDS prevention, testing, care giving, and

condom use. Table 1 presents the summary of findings based on participants' responses to the HIV and AIDS-related statements mentioned below.

Media coverage of HIV and AIDS:

- A1. Is making people live in denial and die.
- A2. Is sensationalizing HIV/AIDS.
- A3. Is encouraging stigma and discrimination against people living with HIV and AIDS.
- A4. The media is stereotyping the disease as disease of the poor, promiscuous, homosexuals, lesbians and drug addicts.
- A5. The language used by media in reporting about HIV and AIDS is often not appropriate, confusing, and the information is not adequate.
- A6. HIV and AIDS information given by the media is often judgmental rather than constructive.
- A7. The media is helping to fight stigma and discrimination against PLWH.
- A8. There are positive changes in the language used by the media reporting about HIV and AIDS.
- A9. There is now human interest angle to media reports about HIV and AIDS.

Table 1: Public perception of media coverage of HIV and AIDS

Statements	True%	False %	Don't know %	Total%
A1	22.5	72.5	5.0	100.0
A2	32.5	63.3	4.2	100.0
A3	9.2	85.0	5.8	100.0
A4	9.2	85.8	5.0	100.0
A5	10.8	85.0	4.2	100.0
A6	4.2	90.8	5.0	100.0
A7	79.2	14.2	6.7	100.0
A8	79.2	15.0	5.8	100.0
A9	84.2	10.0	5.8	100.0

The finding on table 1 shows that 86 respondents (71.7%) disagreed that the media are promoting HIV and AIDS stigma and discrimination, and 26 (21.7%) agreed they are doing that. A total of 114 (95%) respondents agreed

that the media are promoting HIV and AIDS prevention, but 5 (4.2%) disagreed. The result also indicated that 116 (96.7%) respondents agreed the media are helping to: promote HIV and AIDS testing, but 4 (3.3%) disagreed; promote HIV and AIDS care-giving - 110 (91.7%), but 9 (7.5%) disagreed; promote condom use - 113 (94.2%), and 7 (5.8%) disagreed. It also indicated that 109 respondents (90.8%) agreed that the media are helping to promote HIV and AIDS free generation, but 8 (6.7%) disagreed.

The percentage distribution of the respondents that said they “Don’t Know” whether the media are helping to promote any of the HIV and AIDS issues studied were all below 10.

5.2 The public attitudinal responses to media HIV and AIDS coverage

The study of respondents’ attitudes to media reporting of the pandemic revolved around the following HIV and AID related statements:

- B1. I know enough about HIV/AIDS.
- B2. I don't need to know more.
- B3. Most HIV/AIDS information is not relevant to people life style
- B4. The media should do more stories on different aspects of HIV/AIDS pandemic.
- B5. There is inadequate information on HIV/AIDS in the media for success against HIV/AIDS.
- B6. More information is needed in the media regarding HIV/AIDS, especially to inform children and youth about the disease.
- B7. There should be more information on the media on the transmission, treatment, prevention, and consequences of the disease.
- B8. HIV/AIDS information I received from the media is enough to affect my attitude to HIV/AIDS positively.
- B9. The media are doing enough in terms of coverage of the pandemic to bring about attitudinal change to the disease among the people

Table 2: Attitudinal Responses to media HIV and AIDS Coverage

Statements	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Don't know (%)	Total (%)
B1	66.7	30.0	3.3	100.0
B2	14.2	82.5	3.3	100.0
B3	28.3	65.8	5.8	100.0
B4	92.5	5.8	1.7	100.0
B5	68.3	25.0	6.7	100.0
B6	93.3	4.2	2.5	100.0
B7	95.0	5.0	0.0	100.0
B8	55.8	37.5	6.7	100.0
B9	66.7	33.3	0.0	100.0

The percentage distribution of respondents on public attitudes to media HIV and AIDS information communication indicated that 80 respondents (66.7%) believed they know enough about HIV and AIDS, 36 (30%) do not believe they know enough about HIV and AIDS, 99 (82.5%) need to know more, but 17 (14.2%) don't need to know more about HIV and AIDS (see table 2). A total of 79 respondents (65.8) acceded that most HIV and AIDS information are relevant to people's life style, but 34 (28.3%) think otherwise (see table 2).

The result showed also that 111 respondents (92.5%) agreed that the media should do more stories on different aspects of HIV and AIDS pandemic, but 7 (5.8%) disagreed. A total of 82 respondents (68.3%) have the opinion that there is inadequate HIV and AIDS information in the media for success against HIV and AIDS, but 30 (25%) disagreed. There were 112 respondents (93.3%) that want more HIV and AIDS information in media regarding, especially to inform children (teens) and youth about the disease, but 5 (4.2%) disagreed. One hundred and fourteen 114 respondents (95%) agreed that there should be more information in the media on the transmission, treatment, prevention, and consequences of the disease, while 67 respondents (55.8%) agreed that HIV and AID information they received from the media are enough to positively affect their attitude to HIV and AIDS, 45 (37.5%) disagreed. Equally, 80 (66.7%) agreed that the media are doing enough in terms of coverage of the pandemic to bring about attitudinal change to the disease among the people, but 40 (33.3%) disagreed.

5.3 Factors influencing audience attitudinal response to media coverage of the pandemic

This section presents findings on current HIV and AIDS related problems of concern in the province. Table 3 shows factors influencing Limpopo province residents' attitudinal responses to media coverage of the pandemic.

Table 3: Factors influencing audience attitudinal response to media HIV and AIDS coverage

HIV and AIDS related problems	Yes	No	Total
Fear of discrimination	61 (50.8)	59 (49.2)	120 (100.0)
Alcoholism and drugs	74 (61.7)	46 (38.3)	120 (100.0)
Poverty	80 (66.7)	40 (33.3)	120(100.0)
Sexual transmitted disease (STD)	76 (63.3)	44 (36.7)	120 (100.0)
HIV/AIDS opportunistic disease	50 (41.7)	70 (58.3)	120 (100.0)
Increasing HIV and AIDS infection	50 (41.7)	70 (58.3)	120 (100.0)
Multiple sexual partnership	95 (79.2)	25 (20.8)	120 (100.0)
Unplanned teenage pregnancies	63 (52.5)	57 (47.5)	120 (100.0)
Rape (in and outside marriage)	78 (65.0)	42 (35.0)	120 (100.0)
Difficulty assessing HIV and AIDS testing	39 (32.5)	81 (67.5)	120 (100.0)
Difficulty assessing HIV and AIDS counselling and treatment	40 (33.3)	80 (67.8)	120 (100.0)

Overall, the result indicated that multiple sexual partnership ranked the highest HIV and AIDS related problem of concern in the society, with a total of 95 respondents (79.2%) agreeing to this assertion. This was followed by poverty – 80 respondents (66.7%), rape (in and outside marriage) 78 respondents (65%), sexual transmitted disease (STD) 76 (63.3%), alcohol and drugs 74 (61.7%), unplanned teenage pregnancy 63 respondents (52.5%), and fear of discrimination 61 (50.8%). However, HIV and AIDS opportunistic disease and increasing HIV and AIDS infection showed positive signs of reduction with score of 50 respondents (41.7%) each.

6. DISCUSSION

Regarding public perceptions of media coverage of HIV and AIDS, the majority of the respondents indicated that South African mass media are positively empowering the people through their coverage of the pandemic instead of making them live in denial and die. The study showed that the media have adequately and factually informed and educated the public on all aspects of the pandemic

including its mitigation and management. They have also been discouraging stigmatization and discrimination against people living with HIV and AIDS. Equally improved are the media knowledge of the disease. These changes may contribute greatly to making the people responsible enough to take informed decisions and actions concerning their health in particular, and life in general. These may be an outcome of media improved knowledge of the disease and its reporting technicalities as indicated by this study.

The results also showed that overwhelming majority of the respondents – 72% believed the South African media are helping to promote HIV and AIDS prevention as attested by 95% of the respondents, testing - 97%, caregiving - 92%, and condom use - 94% as strategies for prevention of HIV new infections, and management of the disease. The above results indicate that the media efforts in contributing to mitigating, controlling and possible eradication of HIV and AIDS in South Africa is quite recognized and appreciated by the general public. These findings however differ from those by Swanepoel, et al (2007) and Ngan (2007) which found the South African mass media sensational and alarmist in their coverage of the pandemic and its related issues.

The findings on public attitude to media HIV and AIDS information communication indicated that majority of the respondents are convinced that the HIV and AIDS information they received from the media is enough to affect their attitude to HIV and AIDS positively, but 38% of the respondents disagreed with this assertion. The percentage difference between the two groups indicates that though the media is making reasonable effort in their coverage of HIV and AIDS, there is still the need for them to intensify their coverage of the pandemic. This should cover areas such as transmission, treatment, prevention and consequences of the disease, while bearing in mind that young people in the society have the highest HIV and AIDS prevalence. Producing and communicating youth friendly media content will assist in carrying the youth along in the effort against this pandemic.

However, the study further revealed that media programmes and news contents positively changed their attitude in such a way that a good percentage (73) of the respondents visited a doctor or other health care providers; 86% talked to youth and adults about HIV and AIDS, sex, or other difficult issues; 89% talked to siblings and or friends about HIV and AIDS; and 91% talked to a partner about safer sex, birth control, or sexual transmitted diseases. Also, a total of 87% of the

respondents have only one sexual partner and avoid multiple partners; 83%) use condom, while 43% practice total abstinence. While this may be a reflection of the events in the society following media efforts in reporting on HIV and AIDS, it clearly indicates the need for more targeted and concerted effort by all stakeholders to reach the segment of the society that is yet to be affected by media programmes and contents.

The study showed that many of the various catalysts or drivers of HIV and AIDS pandemic still exist in Limpopo Province, South Africa, though at different proportions. All the results showed positive improvement in the overall situation from what it has been previously in all the areas of HIV and AIDS related concern studied. However, despite the availability of free and accessible HIV and AIDS testing, counselling and treatment in the country, there is still fear of discrimination against people living with HIV and AIDS in the Province/South Africa as indicated by the 51% of the respondents in support of this view. However, the extent of the discrimination tends to be far less than before now

Additionally, alcoholism and drugs, sexually transmitted diseases (STD), multiple sexual partnership, and rape (outside and within marriage) are still HIV and AIDS related problems in the society according to 62%, 63%, 79% and 65% of the respondents respectively. These factors have been previously identified as drivers of HIV and AIDS pandemic in South Africa and are still the case as was found in this study. The implication of this is that there will continue to be new HIV and AIDS infections due to alcohol and drug induced reckless lifestyle which has also been linked to teenage pregnancy in this study. Interestingly, the study linked poverty as one of the drivers of HIV and AIDS pandemic in the society. People may be involved in risky sexual behaviour in the course of trying to meet their daily economic and social needs. Therefore the need for government programmes aimed at poverty alleviation is critical to complement media drive against the pandemic. It all points to the fact that, though the media have made good progress in their efforts against HIV and AIDS, they should try to explore the link between the people's socio-cultural behaviour and HIV and AIDS. This study seems to indicate a strong link between people's socio-cultural and economic tendencies and their willingness to respond positive to a call for attitudinal change. Dibua (2009) collaborates this finding.

Difficulty accessing HIV and AIDS testing and counselling is no longer an HIV and AIDS related problem of concern in the province or country according to 68%

of the respondents. This is due to the available and easily accessible Government's HIV and AIDS testing, counselling and treatment programmes. This development implies that people will be aware of their status early enough to be able to manage it well, and those who need treatment can proceed to enroll themselves in the Government's expanded treatment programme. The benefit at individual level will also include reduction in HIV and AIDS related deaths, and funeral costs, and attaining longer life and higher productivity. However, most of the testing and counselling services in the province are concentrated in the urban and peri-urban localities. The services should be extended to the rural areas to enable the people to access it easily.

7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The media have succeeded in penetrating the South African society and have established itself as a significant role player on issues of national interest such as HIV and AIDS pandemic. There is high knowledge level of HIV and AIDS among the people of Limpopo Province, but some gaps still exist among few segments of the society. The media are therefore expected to intensify their coverage of this pandemic, touching on all HIV and AIDS related issues and aspects. Moreover, members of the public are interested in increasing and updating their knowledge of HIV and AIDS through the media. Therefore, sustained coverage is needed to create continual exposure and information update necessary for eventual possible total eradication. Through its HIV and AIDS coverage, the media have positively influenced many people's attitude and behaviour towards the disease, as well as their lifestyle. This may be a contributory factor to why there are moderate HIV and AIDS incidence and prevalence rates in the province compared to other provinces of South Africa.

The media are helping through their coverage to promote HIV and AIDS prevention, testing, counselling, and treatment, caregiving, HIV and AIDS free generation and other related issues in Limpopo Province, South Africa. However, the various catalyst or drivers of HIV and AIDS pandemic remain a challenge, though, to a lesser extent.

This study identified the following major recommendations. Firstly, HIV and AIDS is still a pandemic. Therefore, the media should not decrease their coverage of the pandemic in the country because of the consequences of such development, including the possibility of the disease going underground. Secondly, the South

African media should constantly find better and creative ways of presenting HIV and AIDS news stories to the public in order to keep it interesting to them. Thirdly, the media should not just be the channel for the transmission of HIV and AIDS findings and developments to the public, but media practitioners, particularly editors and all levels of journalists should be given adequate, specialized and formal training on reporting the pandemic. Finally, all stakeholders in the efforts against HIV and AIDS in South Africa should endeavor to keep addressing these issues and work towards achieving the needed behavioural changes in the society.

Overall, even if HIV pandemic has been brought under control, the best strategy is to focus on reducing the number of new cases (incidence) and to direct public attention to behaviours and attitudes that could make them susceptible to HIV infection. The mass media has globally proven indispensable in this instance.

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