

Evaluation of Source of Messages on AIDS by College Students

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Introduction

Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) is now a pandemic. One of the established modes of transmission of AIDS is through sexual intercourse, particularly with multiple partners. This makes people embarrassed when they discuss the disease, either in private or in public, because of its moral connotations and cultural inhibitions.

The prevention of this disease requires that people change their sexual attitudes and lifestyles by not engaging in what is called "risky sexual behaviour." To influence attitude change, Klein has said that the communicator must be considered credible and trustworthy¹. Credibility, he notes, refers to the target's opinion of the communicator's expert ability: the higher the opinion the more effective the message. Others have also stated that there is more attitude change when the communication possesses high credibility rather than low credibility², and the communicator who is trusted produces more attitude change than one who is not³. Thus more attitude change follows from formal communication if the source is trustworthy than if the source is untrustworthy.

The purpose of this study was to assess the degree of credibility and trustworthiness of eight selected sources of communication on AIDS as perceived by students. These sources are: medical doctor, nurse, radio, newspapers, posters, friends, priests and traditional healers. Students read or may hear AIDS messages from these sources regularly except traditional healers. It was assumed that the students, as a result of this exposure, form their own impressions about the credibility and trustworthiness of these sources.

Methods

SAMPLE: The survey was conducted at the Polytechnic, Blantyre in June 1990. All male and female students who were resident in the hostels were included in the survey. The interviewers asked any

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student who happened to be in the hostels at the time of the survey to fill in a questionnaire. 391 students out of 456 (86%) agreed to answer a self-administered questionnaire. 65 students (14%) refused, saying they were busy preparing for their final examinations.

QUESTIONNAIRE: The questionnaire included a list of the source of messages mentioned above. The students rated each source on a 1-4 point scale in terms of perceived credibility and trustworthiness. The key to the rating was as follows:-

- 1 = most credible : most trustworthy
- 2 = more credible : more trustworthy
- 3 = credible : trustworthy
- 4 = not credible : not trustworthy

The completed questionnaires were given to a waiting interviewer in each case. The ratings for each source were manually aggregated and the mean ratings were computed for each source using a manual calculator.

Results

From the Table below it can be seen that the medical doctor and nurse are perceived as the most credible and trustworthy sources of messages on AIDS. Next come the radio and newspaper, then posters and the priest. Friends and traditional healers are perceived as being the least credible and trustworthy.

Table Average Opinion Ratings of Sources of Messages on AIDS as Perceived by College Students (n = 391)

SOURCE	CREDIBILITY	TRUSTWORTHINESS
Medical Doctor	1.2	1.4
Nurse	1.3	1.5
Radio	2.5	2.5
Newspaper	2.5	2.5
Posters	3.0	3.0
Priest	3.3	3.3
Friend	3.6	3.6
Traditional Healer	4.0	4.0

Discussion and Conclusion

The main objective of messages on AIDS is to persuade people to change their attitudes regarding their sexual behaviour and practice. As pointed

out earlier, to influence positive attitude change the communicator, that is the source of the message, must be considered credible and trustworthy by the receiver of the message.

This study has tried to demonstrate that, for these students, other things being equal, medical doctors and nurses are the most credible and trustworthy sources of AIDS messages, seconded by radio, newspapers and posters. Traditional healers and friends are not rated so highly because perhaps these sources may be seen by students not to have expert ability in medical matters.

It could be said that because of the moral implications of AIDS, the priest (minister of religion) might have a major role to play in disseminating messages on AIDS to student bodies. Yet the priest is not perceived as being particularly credible nor trustworthy in terms of AIDS messages. Further it would seem to be disadvantageous to utilize traditional healers and friends to directly communicate AIDS messages to such students as communicators whose motives are questionable will not produce more attitude change¹, and untrustworthy sources

seem to produce little, if any, attitude change³. In this regard, as it has been stated that "doctors and nurses are more likely to influence . . . lifestyles", they should therefore be in the forefront of patient health education⁴.

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