




Review



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Web-based COVID-19 risk communication by religious authorities in Uganda: a critical review

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Abstract

The objectives of this study were to explore the content of web-based communication on COVID-19 by religious authorities (RAs) in Uganda and to assess the level of integration of the Uganda Ministry of Health (MoH) and World Health Organisation (WHO) COVID-19 risk communication guidelines into the statements released by these RAs. A grey literature review was conducted by searching the websites of intra- and inter-religious bodies for the terms “COVID-19” and “coronavirus”. Thematic analysis was used to assess the content of RA statements which were also mapped to the items of the MoH and WHO statements. Results indicate that RA communications were centred on COVID-19 description and management; the need to adhere to established guidelines; and the adoption of health-protective behaviours, notably, social distancing and avoidance of misinformation. RAs also discussed the effects of COVID-19 and its control measures on the population and spoke against pandemic-aggravated injustices (gender-based violence and embezzlement). The RA messages incorporated the WHO statement to a greater extent than the MoH statement. In conclusion, RAs played a critical role in delivering public health messages in Uganda during the COVID-19 pandemic, a position we believe should be maximized by public health authorities for effective communication during emergencies.

Introduction

In Uganda, the government precipitously-before the diagnosis of its first case [1] initiated several social distancing measures including lock down and prevention of mass gathering including suspension of religious gatherings [2]. Most of the president’s directives were to be implemented within a few hours after his address [3]. This made information sharing by local authorities and community leaders difficult, as gatherings were not allowed. During this COVID-19 pandemic, the role of religious leaders in communicating and persuading the population to adhere to the ministry of health

COVID-19 directives cannot be underestimated. It is generally accepted that religion has a positive impact on the health and behavior of the community and that religious leaders, who are highly respected, can influence their followers into adopting health promoting behavior [4]. For many years, they have held an influential position in the Ugandan society, been a source of dependable information and identified regularly and easily with almost every Ugandan [5]. It is therefore not surprising that more than 99% of Ugandans belong to at least one religious grouping [6].

This ban on religious gatherings limits in-person communication between religious leaders and their congregations. To continue meeting the spiritual needs of the population, the religious authorities must adopt alternative methods of keeping in contact with the people. Today, a handful of churches provide different online packages to their members [7]. According to the Uganda demographic and health survey report, Ugandans also receive information through the mobile telephones, mass media and internet [8]. Even with the general increase in the internet coverage in Uganda [9], little is known about its usage by the religious institutions as a medium of communicating public health information. In addition, there has been a call for holistic care that addresses people’s spiritual needs during the COVID-19 pandemic [10] which provides an additional rationale for this study. The objectives of this review were to explore the content of web-based communication on COVID-19 by religious authorities (RAs) in Uganda and to assess the level of integration of Uganda Ministry of Health (MoH)/national and WHO/international COVID-19 risk communication guidelines into the statements released by these RAs. The following questions were asked: what are RAs communicating on COVID-19 risk through websites in Uganda? Do web-based statements on COVID-19 risk by RAs in Uganda integrate the Uganda Ministry of Health (MoH)/national and WHO/international COVID-19 risk communication guidelines?

effects of the pandemic and other challenges brought about by the government's COVID-19 mitigation strategies.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Authors' contributions

Etheldreda Leinyuy Mbivnjo: conceptualization, methodology, investigation, formal analysis, validation and writing-original draft preparation; Ephraim Kisangala: conceptualization, methodology, investigation, formal analysis, writing-reviewing and editing, supervision; Andrew Marvin Kanyike: investigation, formal analysis, writing-reviewing and editing; Denis Kimbugwe: investigation, writing-reviewing and editing; Tian Okucu Dennis: investigation; Justine Nabukeera: investigation. All the authors have read and agreed to the final manuscript.

Table and figures

Table 1: characteristics of included religious authority statements

Figure 1: website content selection process

Figure 2: integration of the national (MoH) statement by religious authorities

Figure 3: integration of the international (WHO) statement by religious authorities

Annexes

Annex 1: quality assessment using an adapted authority, accuracy, coverage, objectivity, date, significance (AACODS) checklist (PDF-62.6 Kb)

Annex 2: research question one; what are religious authorities communicating on COVID-19 risk through websites in Uganda? (Thematic analysis) (PDF-142 Kb)

Annex 3: research question two; do web-based statements on COVID-19 risk by religious

authorities in Uganda integrate the MoH/national COVID-19 risk (PDF-119 Kb)

Annex 4: research question two; do web-based statements on COVID-19 risk by religious authorities in Uganda integrate the WHO/international COVID-19 risk communication guidelines? (PDF-85.1 Kb)

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