Examining the Presentation of Infertility Issues by Newspapers in Uganda*

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This study explored how the health concern of infertility has been framed by newspapers in Uganda from 2008 to 2018, and analyzed how these frames have changed over the 10-year study period. Discussion of infertility, the inability to conceive or carry a pregnancy to live birth after 12 months of regular, unprotected sexual intercourse or after six months in women over age 35 is generally taboo in Uganda. Thus, the media have historically tended to steer clear of presentation of such issues. According to the Ministry of Health in the country, however, approximately 15% of the married heterosexual couples in Uganda experience infertility, but discourse has gravitated towards a female-gender shame-and-blame game, with minimum effort to comprehensively address underlying causes and possible responses. The framing analysis, which focuses on an issue and how it is presented by the media to organize or structure social meanings (Berinsky & Kinder, 2006) was used in this qualitative content analysis study, and the results show that newspapers frame infertility consistently with social-cultural beliefs that it is the women’s problem. None of the articles made it to page one of the newspapers and most coverage was generated from letters to the editor, although there were no considerable disparities in the gender focus of the stories. Further frames included episodic coverage, as well as blaming the female gender for causing infertility. Such framing may negatively impact health seeking behavior among those faced with infertility. Themes related to intervention and solution seeking were identified as key in raising awareness about and dealing with infertility. The implications of these results for media and health practitioners in addressing infertility issues are discussed.

Keywords: infertility, taboo, framing, causes, solutions

Introduction

Infertility has been defined as the failure to conceive in spite of regular unprotected sexual intercourse after two years, in spite of a recorded or known reproductive mechanism to inhibit conception or inhibit a male’s ability to make a female conceive (NIHCE Guidelines, 2004); and also as the inability to conceive or carry a pregnancy to live birth after 12 months of regular, unprotected sexual intercourse (Mascarenhas, Cheung, Mathers, & Stevens, 2012). The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that infertility affects 80 million people worldwide, or about one in 10 couples, and varies from 5% to 30% between countries and regions (Bayoumi, van der Poel, ElSamani, & Boivin, 2018).

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Uganda is one of the countries in the “African infertility belt” that stretches across central Africa from the United Republic of Tanzania in the East to Gabon in the West and in this region, there is the phenomenon described as “barrenness amid plenty”, which refers to the fact that infertility is often most prevalent where fertility rates are also high (Cui, 2010). Fertility rates are often measured by approximating total fertility rate (TFR) which is a hypothetical measure of the number of live births that a woman of child bearing age will have over her reproductive lifetime in a given locality, assuming that she is not subject to mortality in that given period being studied or referred to. Although the TFR of Uganda has fallen from 7.12 children in 1969 to 4.69 children in 2018, it is still among one of the highest both in Africa and the world (World Atlas, 2018; Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2018). In spite of this high fertility rate, in a press statement issued ahead of the 2018 Infertility Symposium held in Uganda, the country’s minister of health said that about 10-15% of the country’s couples cannot have children due to infertility (Uganda Media Center, 2018).

And further, in sharp contrast to the prevalence of infertility, discussion of the issue is generally considered as taboo in the community and those who are affected are ostracized and often lack recourse for assistance to deal with the health or any other condition that could underlie the infertility thus undermining their ability to effectively deal with the issue (Chachamovich et al., 2010). This situation then leads to stigmatization, or social exclusion, which causes further silence and poor coping mechanisms. Goffman (1963) defined stigma as “the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance” (p. 148) and infertility in many parts of the world is accompanied by social stigma for those affected. As a result, even discussion of this topic in the media is rare and could often be dismissive. This paper examined the presentation of infertility issues by newspapers in Uganda over a 10-year period from 2008 to 2018; focusing on the New Vision newspaper.

The New Vision newspaper is one of the media products of New Vision Printing & Publishing Company Limited, a multimedia business of newspapers, magazines, internet publishing, television and radio stations, commercial printing, and advertising and distribution services. The company’s media products are in various local languages, and New Vision is the English daily with a circulation estimated at 30,000 copies daily (http://ug.business.com). Although Bkedde a Luganda, local language daily sells on average 1,000 more copies than New Vision, this research focused on the latter, because it is the largest circulating English newspaper in the country followed by Nation Media Group’s Daily Monitor at 18,003 copies as in December 2017 (http://ug.business.com).

Due to a number of factors including rise in literacy levels, introduction of in vitro fertilisation (IVF) treatment, and a changing social setting landscape, the media have in the past five years been able to increasingly tackle hitherto taboo topics like infertility, and so this paper investigated the trajectory of the discussion and how this has changed over the ten years under study, that is 2008 to 2018, paying attention to the gender, health and other possible assigned ascriptions that are brought to bear on the public discussion of infertility.

The 10-year period was selected because 2008 marked the first documented record of experiences of clinical intervention of IVF and other fertility treatment in the country (Platteau et al., 2008). The collected articles were manually analyzed using the attached coding guidelines, for the frames presented (Gant & Dean, 2007; Höijer, 2011), coded into an Excel dataset, and analyzed using SPSS to investigate the frames used by the media to present the issue of infertility. The research also assessed how these frames have changed over the 10-year period (2008-2018), using content analysis. The qualitative approach for this study was useful because of its resourcefulness in observing and interpreting the selected newspaper articles.
Literature Review

Based on data collected from the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth, approximately 15% of the 28.3 million married heterosexual couples in the United States have experienced the frustration of infertility at some point in their relationship (Chandra, Martinez, Mosher, Abma, & Jones, 2005, as cited in Ning, 2013). Due to a number of medical, psychological and environmental factors, both genders are equally affected by the inability to bear children as well as the attendant negative effects that the individual has to suffer subsequently (Chachamovich et al., 2010). In many cultures in Africa in general and Uganda in particular, those affected by infertility are subject to social ridicule, making them feel inferior as individuals; and the results of this ostracism have been recorded to include “divorce, loss of economic resources, and even the annulment of rights to burial grounds” (Cui, 2010, p. 112). While it is apparent that the global health community has paid considerable attention to reproductive health over the years, such responsiveness has empowered affected communities and individuals to mainly deal with the effects of bearing many children, or having families in a planned manner. However, it is equally important to pay attention to the public debate surrounding the issue of infertility, in order to get a clear, evidence-based understanding of the causes and effects of infertility and offer support to those who need it (Mascarenhas et al., 2012).

Of an estimated 40 million couples who are actively seeking treatment for infertility, 34 million live in the developing world (Kudesia et al., 2016). Research conducted about the situation in Uganda has established that discrimination, stigma and ostracism are aimed at couples, and especially women, who are unable to have children. A case in point is in the 2010 World Health Report of a married woman who was “banned from attending her father-in-law’s funeral” and is “extremely isolated” to the point of not being “regarded as human” due to failure to conceive.

The role of the media cannot be undermined in educating communities to understand that infertility affects all genders equally and so the solution lies in a holistic to address causes and find remedies. While addressing the 2016 International Federation of Fertility Societies Congress held in Delhi, India in November 2016, Joyce Lay, a member of Parliament from Kenya said that,

In our culture, a woman is always blamed for infertility. She carries the shame, embarrassment and tears in private. We need to create awareness by providing information and education on infertility so that both men and women can talk about it.

Kudesia et al. (2018) cited harsh social, emotional, and health consequences that accompany childlessness, including high rates of psychological distress, including depression and anxiety, among infertile women, with the desire to achieve a live birth being an existential concern. Larsen (2000) noted that up to 30% of the couples in Uganda suffer from primary or secondary infertility. Many of these subsequently fail to have children even when they desire to do so. Often the women are treated as lesser human beings by both their families and community members, “they risk rejection from their husband, family and the socio-economic deprivation puts them at higher risk for domestic violence and prostitution” (Dyer et al., 2005, as cited in Platteau et al., 2008, p. 91).

A study conducted from April to June 2013 at the infertility and prenatal clinics of Mulago National Hospital in Kampala, Uganda revealed that infertile patients are 2.3 times more likely to be threatened at home and 2.1 times more likely to be the victims of physical violence inflicted by their intimate partner; and further that male factor infertility was unrecognized, with only one of 83 subjects knowing that it (the male factor) is
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one of the three main causes of infertility (Kudesia et al., 2016). Although scientifically, infertility can be due to either the male or female partner, many societies worldwide blame the women for lack of conception.

Further, societies are unaware of health-seeking alternatives, because of the refusal to treat infertility as a disease. Prof. Joe Leigh Simpson (2013), president of the International Federation of Fertility Societies said while addressing the 69th Annual Meeting of the American Society for Reproductive Medicine that:

Infertility is a disease, and no disease should be a stigma, or an excuse for violent or threatening behavior. Infertility may be due to a problem affecting either a male or female partner, but in many cases it can be treated successfully. There is no doubt that people need to be better educated about infertility.

The media have a role to play in this education process if communities are to be sensitized about the causes and treatment for infertility and health seeking interventions are provided in an open, deliberative way.

Dr. Gaston Byamugisha, a marriage therapist and lecturer in the department of psychology at Kyambogo University, Uganda said that infertility can be a big problem in marriage—“especially in the African culture where a union is not considered one if there is no child” (Nabusoba, 2007). The stigma associated with infertility, as well as the emotional distress, has also been found in studies conducted in South Asia and the Middle East, where it has been demonstrated that infertility can be associated with increased interpersonal violence among infertile women (Unisa, 1999; Ardabily, Moghadam, Salsali, Ramezanazadeh, & Nedjat, 2011). In addition, despite other pressing health and social priorities, infertility is among the most common reasons women obtain gynecology consults in Nigeria, Kenya, and other African countries (Ali et al., 2011). In Uganda, as in much of sub-Saharan Africa, overcoming infertility is a critical need despite a high national fertility rate of 5.96 births per women in 2014 (Kudesia et al., 2016).

Framing Theory and Health Communication

In spite of audience segmentation and selective information seeking habits among populations, the general public still relies on mass media for information about health issues, especially in Uganda. Thus, message presentation on a particular issue is important to the audience (Chang, 2012). Entman’s (1993) framing theory posits that the media have a bearing on how the public thinks about issues, by influencing what definitions, causal attributions, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendations they deem applicable to an issue. A frame is a core idea that creates a specific narrative and, therefore, specific meanings (Neuendorf, 2002). Further, frames are components of the public discourse, a larger “package” that includes signifiers from which “symbolic devices” are generated (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). The “symbolic devices” can be the following: catchphrases, depictions, exemplars, and visual images (Pan & Kosicki, 1993). However, it has also been acknowledged that media coverage of a particular issue generally employs a limited number of frames, that is, the “central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning” (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989, p. 28) and it is such provided meaning in newspaper articles that this research sought to unravel in the discussion of infertility issues in Uganda.

Framing is a particular way in which, for various reasons intended and otherwise, a certain news story is presented to the audience. Wallack and colleagues as cited in Kline (2011) said, “Everything cannot be said about every issue in every story in the short space of a newspaper article or television broadcast” (p. 252). Therefore, newspapers choose what angle to take while covering a story and often that angle determines the influence or effect that the content will have on the audience. The process of angle selection has effects that
Kline (2011) referred to as “dilemmas” which include incomplete coverage of an issue, misrepresentation of facts, inaccuracies and gender stereotyping among others (p. 254). In spite of these dilemmas, the audience is left with reflections on what is considered important and so should be prioritized in terms of granting it attention as something that should be on top of the agenda, relegating others, in policy making or simply daily life discussions (McCombs, 1994).

While analyzing a story for framing, consideration should be paid to both the page placement as well as the words, graphics and angle given to the story. The articles placed on the back and front pages command more attention, and those on the inside pages are considered as less important. By implication, the front page stories are flagged off as more important for the reader, thus such factors influence priority of exposure as well as seriousness of consideration (Freyenberger, 2013). Editorial initiative is indicated in content—for example, letters to the editor are audience generated as opposed to media house generated. Thus, although letters to the editor are an indicator of representation in terms of allocation of space for coverage, these reflect no editorial initiative on the organization’s part in terms of resource coverage. For that matter, editorial content placement as well as sourcing all affects the framing of news.

The coverage of health news may thus be categorized into various frames, including: causes of infertility; infertility as a taboo in society; stigmatization of those affected; intervention (treatment or offering solutions); and attribution of blame. There is a great possibility that the message frames adopted by news media can influence public debate and could possibly assist in changing the direction of worrisome social phenomena and enhance health seeking assistance and acceptance for those affected, so that there is less social stigma and less acting out of ignorance. This study mostly applied Graneheim and Lundman’s (2004) framework with additional elements to suit the Ugandan context, to investigate the news focused on infertility. It specifically studied the causes, gendered portrayal, and solutions. The latter stage of data analysis investigated how these frames have changed over a 10-year period by comparing the years 2008 to 2012; and 2013 to 2018.

RQ 1: What are the frames that were used for infertility stories between 2008 and 2012 in the New Vision newspaper?

RQ 2: What are the frames that were used for infertility stories carried between 2013 and 2018 in the New Vision newspaper?

RQ 3: How did the frames change between the first and second five-year periods of the 10-year study?

Method

This is a qualitative, descriptive study which utilized content analysis (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). A qualitative approach in this case was useful because of its resourcefulness in studying and interpreting the selected newspaper articles. Further, it enabled the researcher to gain a richer understanding of the subject matter as well as some of the subjective realities presented by the authors, or those who experience the situation of infertility. Since the reality of infertility is often individually and socially constructed, the qualitative approach was further beneficial for interpretative sense of the narration in the newspaper articles, or the reported accounts of those affected.

All the newspaper articles published in the New Vision newspaper from January 2008 until December 2018 written about the topic of infertility were selected for study. The selection was done both manually in the archives of the newspaper library (for articles from 2008 to 2010, because these were not available in the electronic archives); and also by doing an internet search of the newspaper’s online archives for the articles
from 2011 up to 2018. The selected articles were those specifically related to infertility. However, to ensure the capture of alternative constructs of infertility, an identical search was also done for articles with the following key terms: “childlessness”, “pregnancy”, “conception”, “fertility treatment”, “sperm count”, and “sperm donation”.

Each of the articles that passed the selection criteria was read in full and coded for the presence of taboo frame, intervention frame, or attribution of blame. The articles were also read carefully to identify reported causes of infertility, such as smoking, post-abortion trauma, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), witchcraft, delay to starting a family, pollution (or other environmental forces); and the constructions of infertility, for example, gendered portrayals, and the presentation of specific “causes” of and/or “solutions” to infertility. The articles talked of “infertility” in the headlines but subsequently contained little more information on the subject, or digressed to another health or fitness issue was disqualified. The items that had only one response had a single indicator for presence, while a binary coding strategy, yes = 1 and no = 0, was used to indicate whether the posts include a particular frame or not (see attached codebook).

Two independent coders, along with the researcher, were enlisted to assist in coding the articles and training was conducted for two days. We randomly selected 20 articles and these were used to train the coders. When disagreements occurred, the author and the two coders reviewed and discussed the articles together to gain consensus and determine the frames of the content. During the training process, “speculation” as an indicated lack of knowledge of the cause of infertility was discarded, along with “suspicion” and “disaster” news frames. An additional 20 articles were randomly selected to establish inter-coder reliability in order to detect potential coder drift (insufficient adherence to coding decision rules). The reliability coefficients (Cohen’s kappa) for the findings ranged from $\kappa = 0.702$ to $\kappa = 0.835$. The typical range is $\kappa = 0.61-0.80$, which is considered to be substantial agreement, and so this indicates that there was sufficient reliability here established.

**Results**

**Descriptive Statistics**

Of the 148 articles collected, 132 (90%) fit the selection criteria (see attached coding sheet). A total of six articles were disregarded because they were repeated—these were feature articles whose exact content was re-run months, sometimes years later, on the same issue of infertility and so they were only coded and analyzed once for when they first appeared. Another 10 articles were excluded because they did not fit the selection criteria. For example, they had the word “infertility” in the headline but then went ahead to address other issues like the importance of proper hygiene, or having a balanced diet. Their content was less than 10% on infertility and more on other health issues. Therefore, with the 16 excluded articles, the final sample consisted of 132 articles. Of these, 87 were from the 2008 to 2012 time period, while 45 were from the 2013 to 2018 time period under review.

**Article Placement**

Figures 1 and 2 summarize the article placement in terms of the page of the newspaper on which the stories on infertility appeared for the time periods 2008-2012 and 2013-2018 respectively. The greatest percentage of the articles appeared on every odd page after page 3, and none of the articles made it to page one of the newspapers.
Figure 1. Page placement for 2008-2012.

Figure 2. Page placement for 2013-2018.

Genre Representation

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genres</th>
<th>2008-2012</th>
<th>2013-2018</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Editorials</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Features</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>20.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opinion/Commentary</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letters to the editor</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>69.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1 summarizes the genre representation of the articles on infertility from the sample data. It was revealed that 69% of the articles between 2008 and 2012 were letters to the editor, 20.7% were features, 4.6% were news stories, 3.4% of them were editorials, and the least were 2.3% opinion or commentary articles. For the period 2013 to 2018, 84% were letters to the editor, 15.6% were feature stories, and other genres, that is, news, editorials and commentaries were not represented.

Purpose of the Story

The research carried out a textual analysis to assess the purpose of the newspaper articles. The studied concepts were creating awareness, defined as that information which is given in order to sensitize the public and make them better informed about an issue; persuasion, which was defined as an attempt to influence the readers towards a certain viewpoint; sensationalism which is intended to produce a startling or thrilling expression or to excite or generate curiosity; castigation, which is intended to criticize the actions of others; or to reprimand those affected by infertility as the causes of the issue; as well as entertainment, which is simply intended to amuse the readers. It was found that 81.6% of the articles on infertility carried between 2008 and 2012 were majorly to create awareness and educate the readers. Further, 10.3% of the articles were geared towards sensationalism or producing a startling or thrilling expression and generating curiosity among the readers, 5.7% of the articles were for persuasion purposes, whereas 1.1% of the articles were criticizing the actions of others. This therefore implies that most of the stories covered between 2008 and 2012 in the New Vision are majorly to create awareness by educating and sensitizing the public.

For the time period 2013 to 2018, the articles in the New Vision newspaper on infertility issues revealed that 95.6% of them were for the purpose of awareness creation and educating the readers. A lesser percentage, 2.2% of the articles, were focused on persuasion, and castigation or criticizing the actions of others, respectively.

Table 2 summarizes the findings on the purpose of the article coverage for the two time periods, 2008-2012; and 2013-2018:

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose of the Article</th>
<th>2008-2012</th>
<th>2013-2018</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness/education</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>81.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persuasion</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensationalism</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Castigation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cannot tell</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Gender Focus

The articles were also reviewed for their gender focus, that is, whether they emphasized aspect of infertility as an issue affecting one gender more than the other. Also analyzed here is whether the protagonists in the article were either male or female. For the period 2008 to 2012, 46% of the articles mainly had male protagonists and focused on infertility issues affecting the male gender. Further, 42.5% of the articles for the period 2013 to 2018 focused on the female gender, 9.2% of the stories focused on both genders equally, whereas 2.3% of the articles were gender neutral.
For the review period of 2013 to 2018, a total of 51.1% of the articles focused on the female gender. Further, 33.3% of the articles focused on the male gender and 8.9% of the stories equally focused on both genders, whereas 6.7% of the articles were neutral. Table 3 summarizes the gender focus of the articles in the data:

### Table 3
**Gender Focus of the Newspaper Articles**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>46.0</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>42.5</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>51.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both equally</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Gender of the Author

The results show that 54% of the articles in the time period of 2008 to 2012 in the *New Vision* were mainly authored by female writers. It was further noted that 32.3% of these articles were authored by male writers, whereas the researcher could not tell the gender of 13.8% of the article authors.

For the period 2013 to 2018, a total of 51% of the articles were authored by female writers, 44.4% by males, and the researcher could not ascertain the gender of 4.4% of the article authors.

### Dominant Frames

The data were analyzed to ascertain the dominant frame in the articles on infertility, focusing on the thematic, episodic and hybrid frames. Thematic news frames are those which synthesize events or issues on infertility into an overriding concern, providing background knowledge on the same. The episodic news frames present single, specific cases related to the issue, while the hybrid or mixed news frames refer to specific cases but also include some background information, thus equally representing both the episodic and thematic frames.

The results show that 65.5% of the articles carried between 2008 and 2012 in the *New Vision* newspaper were episodic since the news frames presented single, specific cases related to the issue. It was further noted that 23% of the articles in the same time period had thematic frames, whereas only 11.5% of the articles had mixed or hybrid frames.

For the time period 2013 to 2018, the results show that 80% of the articles had episodic frames, presenting single, specific cases related to the issue of infertility. Further, 11.5% of the articles had thematic frames, synthesizing events into an overriding issue on infertility and provided background knowledge on it, whereas 11.1% of the articles in the same time period had mixed or hybrid frames, incorporating background information and synthesizing that with an event concerning the issue of infertility. Figure 3 shows the dominant frame representation for 2008 to 2012 while Figure 4 shows the dominant frame representation for the period 2013 to 2018 respectively. Overall, the episodic frame articles increased over the last five years under study as compared to the first five.
Reported Causes of Infertility

Results on the reported causes of infertility in the newspaper articles show that in the period 2008 to 2012, the majority authors and protagonists indicated that 72.4% of the cases of infertility are attributed to the female gender. This attribution is mainly in terms of finger pointing and indicating that the females are culpable for something that resulted in infertility. It was further noted that 57.5% of the cases of infertility were attributed to the male gender, still indicating that they did something as individuals that prohibits them from subsequently being able to have children. A greater percentage of the articles (74.7%) attributed infertility to other causes, which in this case varied and could not be quantified severally. Examples of these causes were: (frequent) change in sexual partners, use of contraceptives, lack of virility among men, prior bacterial and viral infections, substance abuse, and prior use of herbal medication to treat a number of ailments in general, and improve virility among men in particular.
Other indicated causes to a lesser extent were smoking, prior abortion, delay to having a family, and STDs. The research sought to interrogate witchcraft as a reported cause of infertility as had been reflected in the literature review; however, none of the reviewed articles carried witchcraft as a reported cause of infertility in the time period 2008 to 2012.

During the review period 2013 to 2018, the results indicate that 77.8% of the newspaper articles attributed infertility to the female gender, an increase of 5% from the prior five-year review period. Further, 51.1% of the articles attributed infertility to the male gender, a 7% reduction from the prior five-year period under review. And the “other causes” of infertility also increased to 82.2%. These were still varied and could not be quantified severally.

Other causes to which infertility was attributed to a lesser extent were: STDs (31%); prior abortion (6.7%), delay to start a family (4.4%), and pollution (4.4%). Finally, none of the articles attributed infertility to witchcraft. Table 4 summarizes the reported causes of infertility, categorized into the two time periods (2008 to 2012) and 2013 to 2018, indicating the shifts in reported causes over time.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reported cause</th>
<th>2008-2012</th>
<th>2013-2018</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smoking</td>
<td>Presence (Yes)</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Absence (No)</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attributed to female gender</td>
<td>Presence (Yes)</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Absence (No)</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attributed to male gender</td>
<td>Presence (Yes)</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Absence (No)</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abortion</td>
<td>Presence (Yes)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Absence (No)</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STDs</td>
<td>Presence (Yes)</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Absence (No)</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Witchcraft</td>
<td>Absence (No)</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delay to start a family</td>
<td>Presence (Yes)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Absence (No)</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>87</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pollution</td>
<td>Absence (No)</td>
<td>83</td>
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<td></td>
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Prevalent News Themes

The results for the period 2008 to 2012 show that the most predominant theme of the articles reviewed was intervention at 94.3%. In this research, intervention was defined as the attempt to offer help, as well as an explanation of services available to assist those affected by infertility to deal with the health issue.

This theme was followed by prevalence at 27%, confirming the fact that infertility is indeed a health concern for a large number of people in the society in Uganda. Attribution of blame stood at 23% and so to a large extent the health concern of infertility was being blamed on somebody, a group of people, an institution or behavior. Finally, the least reflected theme was taboo at 10%, and so stigmatization was the least indicated theme in the reviewed articles.

For the review period 2013 to 2018, the results show that attribution of blame was a more predominant theme, standing out at 88.9%, followed by intervention at 84.4%; taboo at 28.9% and prevalence at 16%. It is worth noting that one newspaper article could have more than one theme present and so the results are indicative of concurrent theme presence. The shift from intervention being the highest, to attribution of blame, when comparing the two five-year periods is possibly because there is heightened need for institutional assistance for those affected, and the approach is shifting from infertility being a strictly personal concern to one that needs to be streamlined in terms of resource attention on an institutional level in the country.

Solutions Offered to Deal With Infertility

For the period 2008 to 2012, most of the articles offered medical intervention as a solution that would go a long way in solving the health concern of infertility (90%). This offered solution was followed by adherence to certain lifestyle practices like watching one’s weight and diet at 30%; and early detection at 13%. More public debate of the issue and less stigmatization was indicated last at 2.3%.

Reflecting the first five years under review, the results for 2012 to 2018 also highlighted medical intervention as the greatest solution to the health issue of infertility, at 82.2%. This was followed by early detection at 40%; adherence to certain lifestyle practices like watching one’s weight and diet at 20%; and finally, more public debate and less stigmatization of those affected came in with the least indication at 6.7%.

Discussion

Previous studies show that due to a number of factors, both genders are equally affected by the inability to bear children as well as the attendant negative effects that the individual has to suffer subsequently (Chachamovich et al., 2010). In many cultures in Africa in general and Uganda in particular, those affected by infertility are subject to social ridicule, making them feel inferior as individuals, and this has sometimes been worsened by scanty media attention to the issue (Cui, 2010). The current study examines the media frames of infertility in newspapers in Uganda and how these have changed over the ten year period of 2008 to 2018. Media priority setting in terms of presentation can have the effect of setting the agenda for discussion of an issue and also offering suggestions for resolution for those affected by the health concern presented (McCombs, 1994).

Results show that the greatest percentage of the newspaper articles on infertility appeared on every odd page after page 3, and none of the articles made it to page one of the newspapers. Page placement is a strong indicator of what is important on a particular newspaper day, with the most crucial news appearing on the first three pages. Placing the greater percentage of infertility news inside the newspaper points to reduced priority focus for the topic since page placement has been shown to play a major role in the attention that a reader gives
to the story (Freyenberger, 2013). The newspaper however has considerable center-spread placement of infertility stories, although this still reduced from 13% to 7% in the subsequent five years of the study. This further points to a relegation of infertility discussion to less important sections of the newspaper, reducing focus and attention on the issue. The study therefore provides insight into the limited prioritization of infertility issues by newspapers in Uganda.

Most of the coverage on issues of infertility was generated from letters to the editor. News stories and editorials indicate editorial initiative on the part of a news organization, while letters to the editor reflect audience initiative. For whatever reason, lack of interest in the topic or lack of resources to be allocated to its coverage, it is apparent that the issue of infertility ranks low on the list of priorities for coverage by the newspaper. However, the percentage increase in story coverage from 3.4% in the first five years, to 15.6% in the period 2013 to 2018 is encouraging in terms of attention directed towards the concern of infertility. In the last five years of the study, it was noted that the newspaper had developed a dedicated health issues page and this could account for the increase in attention to fertility issues. The study is thus useful in proving that editorial dedication is crucial for attention to be given to health issues in general, and infertility concerns in particular.

Given that the majority of the content was audience initiated, it thus follows that the major purpose of the same content was awareness creation. It is possible that the affected audience, unrepresented in the already available content, sought to reflect the need for coverage of infertility issues, of their own accord. It was noted that awareness creation also increased over the years, rising to 95.6% in the last five years under study, much higher than the other perceived purposes of persuasion, sensationalism, castigation, or entertainment. This could point to a knowledge gap and so newspapers can play the role of dedicating more coverage to the provision of information and therefore raise awareness of the issue of infertility in the community.

There were no considerable disparities in the gender focus of the stories, and there was an almost equal representation of both female and male in terms of the protagonists of the stories. Further, considering that the majority were letters to the editor, this reflects the reality that the issue of infertility equally affects both male and female (Simpson, 2013). The same was true of the gender of the author, there was an almost equal representation of writers—both male and female authors wrote about the issue of infertility. This further points to the fact that infertility equally affects both genders.

The results show that episodic news frames dominated the coverage of infertility in the newspaper. This indicates single, specific event attention as opposed to sustained synthesis of the factors surrounding the health concern of infertility. This episodic coverage increased from 65.5% in the first five years, to 80% in the period 2013 to 2018. Such episodic attention relegates coverage and attention to when an event, for example, an annual conference takes place, or in case an affected person raises an issue. Thematic coverage of issues is advisable, because it synthesizes ideas and offers a more holistic approach to addressing the underlying causes and available recourse mechanisms to those affected by the health concern of infertility as opposed to episodic coverage.

Results also showed that the female gender was majorly indicated as the one responsible for causing infertility. This was done through finger pointing and reporting that the females were in a way culpable for something that led to the infertility. This confirmed earlier research that the female gender is ostracized more in many African communities, when it comes to apportioning blame in instances of infertility among couples (WHO, 2010). Such framing may negatively impact health seeking behavior among those faced with infertility, drawing them further away from solution seeking and into isolation and possible harmful alternatives.
The other reported causes of infertility were varied and these included: frequent change in sexual partners, use of contraceptives, lack of virility among men, prior bacterial and viral infections, substance abuse, and prior use of herbal medication to treat a number of ailments in general, and improve virility among men in particular. These findings point to the diversity and complexity of the health issue of infertility and the importance of having a multi-faceted approach to addressing the same for those affected. Therefore, sensitizing communities about the causes of infertility through the media may lead to greater knowledge and clarity, so that it is understood that infertility is a health concern that can affect both male and female. More importantly, since some people blame the female out of ignorance of the many causes of infertility, knowledge building would lead to more solution seeking instead of finger pointing.

A number of studies have highlighted the fact that stigma is one of the major effects of infertility, and that those affected are ostracized to the point of being regarded as less human than their child bearing counterparts in many societies (Unisa, 1999; Ardabily et al., 2011). Our results show that intervention or the need to do something about infertility was the predominant news theme in the framing of infertility stories, and this is promising as it shows an attempt to offer help, as well as an explanation of services available to assist those affected. Further highlighted solutions were: medical intervention, followed by adherence to certain lifestyle practices like watching one’s weight and diet, as well as early detection of infertility. Although more public debate of the issue and less stigmatization ranked low and were indicated as minor solutions to the issue of infertility, these findings can help inform the need for newspapers to increase coverage of stories dedicated to intervention in order to reduce the stigma associated with infertility, and also encourage those affected to seek solutions for the health issue. This points to the fact that something can be done about the situation of infertility for those affected, in terms of addressing the causes and finding solutions to the health concern of infertility.

The present study focused on the New Vision newspaper and its framing of fertility issues in Uganda. However, although this newspaper has the greatest sales, there are more newspapers albeit with less coverage, as well as broadcasters on radio, television and the Internet in the country. These too should be assessed to analyse whether their framing of infertility enhances resolution of the issue or not.

In summary, this study provides several important implications for the framing of infertility by the media. By understanding how to focus both resources, space and attention to the specific causes and solutions of infertility, those affected by the health concern, as well as the community will understand how to deal with the issue holistically as a health concern, and not as a stigmatizing, personal matter. The organizations working in the health sector as well as the media will be able to strategise on how to reduce the negative impact of infertility, by focusing on intervention and knowledge building.

References


EXAMINING THE PRESENTATION OF INFERTILITY ISSUES


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