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RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Where does this buck stop? Media conferment of responsibility for the spread of HIV/AIDS in Uganda: A newspaper framing analysis

**Angella Napakol**

**Email:** [anapakol@ucu.ac.ug](mailto:anapakol@ucu.ac.ug)

### ABSTRACT

This study examines how responsibility for the spread, treatment, and prevention of HIV/AIDS in Uganda was framed in the print media, specifically in two newspapers, The New Vision and The Daily Monitor, over a twenty-year period from 1992 to 2011. The research employs framing theory, which explores how news reports shape the way audiences perceive and interpret issues. Focus was on two types of frames: thematic frames, which provide a broad contextual understanding of the issue, and episodic frames, which focus on specific cases or events. The findings reveal that throughout the study period, the thematic frame was the most dominant in both newspapers, emphasizing a societal approach to addressing HIV/AIDS. This suggests that the media portrayed the responsibility for HIV/AIDS as a collective one, requiring the involvement of society as a whole. Thematic framing allows for in-depth discussions and resolution of the issue, promoting a holistic approach to addressing the epidemic. The results highlight the consistency in media framing of HIV/AIDS in Uganda, reflecting the commitment of leadership, especially by the head of state to tackle the issue comprehensively. With all this however, the society still suffered stigma in relation to HIV. The limitation to this study is the focus on only on two English newspapers and suggests that future research should consider a broader range of media outlets. In conclusion, this research provides valuable insights into how the media frames the responsibility for HIV/AIDS, emphasizing the importance of thematic framing for promoting a holistic approach to addressing health concerns in a community. Understanding the framing of HIV/AIDS in the media can inform strategies for both health and the media organisations to effectively engage the public.

## Introduction

In 2022 about 39 million people were living with HIV of whom 1.3 million were newly infected, and about 630,000 died of the pandemic globally<sup>1</sup>. In Uganda, the first incidence of HIV/AIDS was diagnosed in 1982<sup>2</sup>. However, by 2022 about 1.4 million people were living with HIV in the country with a prevalence rate of 5.1%. HIV/AIDS in Uganda has been covered extensively by both print and broadcast media<sup>3,4</sup>. For example, Nassanga<sup>5</sup> analyzed the coverage of HIV/AIDS in Uganda over a year. On the other hand, Kiwanuka-Tondo<sup>6</sup> compared the coverage of HIV/AIDS by the government and private press in Uganda over five years (2000-2004). The purpose of this study is to analyze how the print media in Ugandan accorded responsibility for the spread, treatment and prevention of HIV/AIDS through their coverage from 1992 to 2011 by using thematic and episodic frames. The understanding of thematic and episodic in this study follow from Iyengar's<sup>7</sup> 1991 study where he contextualised the responsibility and blame apportioned to individuals versus society in the issue of poverty. The idea that the use of either frames can have the public either blame an individual or the society as a whole for social ills.<sup>8</sup> Iyengar maintained that individual apportionment of responsibility often led to stigma while if society as whole was held responsible, then solutions to such ills would be more meaningful and easily adopted.

## Framing Theory

Framing theory supposes that the knowledge people have about issues, their behavior and action is informed by their context. Specifically, the theory premises that "how an issue is portrayed in news reports can have an effect on how it is appreciated by audiences"<sup>9</sup>(p.692). This thinking is indebted to the work of Goffman<sup>10</sup> who defines "frames as devices that enable individuals to locate, perceive, identify, and label occurrences or information" (p. 20). Goffman further described frames as explanations of a circumstance that comprise organization and subjective components. That is, framing tells us in what way to think about an issue and shape the way the public categorize and illuminate events. He argues that frames are cognitive constitutions that control both the opinion and description of reality stating that "each primary framework allows its user to locate, perceive, identify, and label a seemingly infinite number of concrete occurrences defined in its limits" (p. 21).

The suggestion that frames are "a central organising idea or storyline that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events"<sup>11</sup> (p. 143). They

further suggest that how issues appear and modify themselves ultimately is a matter of considerable significance. Although journalists do not simply reflect reality but somewhat, during the course of "their work habits, norms, and rules of thumb, they powerfully create news out of the accessible raw materials" (ibid). Such dynamic creation of the here and now might only be inescapable at particular moments of an issue compared to others.<sup>12</sup> As an investigative approach, frame analysis studies the collection of particular features of an issue, images, stereotypes, messengers, metaphors, among others utilised to prompt precise reactions.<sup>9</sup>

Frames occur at two levels,<sup>13</sup> "firstly, as mentally stored principles for information processing and secondly, as characteristics of news texts" (p. 13) Meaning that framing is a macro level as well as a micro level construct.<sup>14,15</sup> As a macro level construct, framing concerns means of presentations that journalists utilize to describe messages in a manner that reiterates prevailing fundamental schemas amongst their audience.<sup>15</sup> This implies that framing for journalists is an essential instrument used to ease the sophistication of a topic, as a result of the limitations due to particular media related news holes and airtime deficiencies. Frames therefore, grow into instrumental means for efficiently portraying somewhat composite issues in a manner that causes them to be comprehensible to ordinary people since they appeal to prevalent cognitive schemas.<sup>12</sup> As a micro construct, framing demonstrates the way people use information and presentation characteristics concerning issues as they construct opinions. In an essay, whose purpose was to describe the features of frames in context of production and the interpretation of news in order to provide framing theory an added representative meaning,<sup>16</sup> Van Gorp described framing as "the characteristic means in which, on one hand, journalists construct news content within a common frame of reference according to an underlying structure of meaning and on the other hand, means in which the public who embrace these frames perceive the world in a same way as the journalist". Media producers utilise a collection of insistent frames, which as a result conceivably regulate the aggregate possibilities that are accessible to the publics as they fashion their social reality.<sup>17</sup> The argument is that media organisations frame news reports in a way that prompts auspicious responses from the audience,<sup>13</sup> and the expected responses of the audience also influence the rhetoric and conducts of political leaders who he claims are the major patrons of news frames. It should be noted that the essential prerequisite for media effect on policy or politics is not that everybody construes a report in the same way; it appears essential simply

that substantial majorities are believed to do so. Framing therefore allows media personalities and the public an understanding that similar happenings can have dissimilar meanings contingent on the type of frame employed. In other words, the mainstay of framing is found within social interaction<sup>18 16</sup>

### Episodic and thematic frames

The episodic news frames take the form of a case study or focused account that portrays public issues in relation to tangible occurrences.<sup>8</sup> In comparison, the thematic frame situates public issues in somewhat broad or abstract frameworks that assumes the form of background reports focused on broad after-effects and circumstances. Episodic and thematic frames are primarily dissimilar in way that episodic framing portrays particular occurrences that present different issues while thematic framing appends the above with background contextual information leading to such occurrences. Visually, episodic reports create good pictures while thematic frames contain talking heads.<sup>7</sup> In practice however, hardly any news reports are entirely episodic or thematic: even the most thorough, exhaustive examination of a specific poor person for example, always comprises lead in comments by the writer on the extent of poverty countrywide. Nonetheless, for many news stories, a particular frame or the other obviously dominates. Thematic frames, though preferable in the coverage of public topics such as HIV/AIDS for their broad outlook on issues and social attribution of responsibility as an after effect; are tedious. Coverage of interconnected background information would necessitate comprehensive, interpretive analysis which would be time-consuming to put together and would be predisposed to criticism of journalistic bias.<sup>7</sup>

### Attribution of responsibility and framing effects

By presenting news in either episodic or thematic manner, news media affects “attribution of responsibility equally for the creation of problems or situations (causal responsibility) and for the resolution of these problems or situations (treatment responsibility)”<sup>8</sup> (p.3). Attribution of responsibility is a significant component of all social knowledge. While recognizing that responsibility might be dispensed according to different standards, psychological inquiry has centered on causality and treatment as predominantly powerful definitions. Lyengar suggests that casual responsibility pays attention to who or what has the authority to ease or not ease the problem. Consequently, if the problem of HIV/AIDS is evaluated in designates of causal responsibility, the appropriate questions

relate to the procedures by which people living with HIV/AIDS are treated in society or if they can access or afford medical care. Treatment responsibility in contrast, seeks to ascertain who has the authority and importance to, for instance, assuage or maintain unemployment. For example, the belief that HIV/AIDS exists because people are reckless in behaviour and that proper behaviour is the best way to avoid getting infected with HIV/AIDS makes it apparent that people living with HIV/AIDS are responsible for their own plight. Attributions of responsibility without warning can have tremendous effects on self-images, evaluations of other people, and emotional arousal. Attribution of responsibility likewise exerts an influential control on behaviour, so much so that ‘misattribution’ skills have demonstrated success in alleviating behavioural ailments, in prompting positive social behaviour, and even in increasing longevity and reinforcing over-all psychological wellbeing.<sup>8</sup> The use of either episodic or thematic framing influences the way in which persons apportion responsibility for different subjects especially because “episodic framing tends to cause individualistic rather than societal attributions of responsibility while thematic has the opposite effect”<sup>8</sup> (p.16). In a study to determine effects of framing on attributions of responsibility for poverty, unemployment, and racial inequality,<sup>8</sup> it was found that individual responsibility included topics of personality insufficiencies such as laziness, inadequate skills, and social responsibility to be topics of economic conditions like cost of living, technological progress, institutional barriers, and inadequate government effort. The episodic framing of poverty for example augmented individualistic responsibility while thematic framing amplified attributions of societal responsibility. Attributions of responsibility strongly influence beliefs, attitudes and even behaviours in a wide range of areas. The ability of news frames to change attributions shows that attributions can be understood as short-lived elements that co-exist in people’s cognizance with many of other essential psychological cues, a number of which have been ruminated over the course of time.<sup>8</sup> However, attribution of responsibility can only affect over-all attitudes to the degree that people broaden their thinking about the causes and treatments of individual issues past instantaneous significant material of these issues. To the extent that the public do not hold society responsible for social or political issues, they are less ready to approve government initiatives to attend to such issues. For example, when public hold society responsible for poverty, they tend to approve government attempts to support the poor<sup>8</sup> (p.139).

## Framing and the psychology of media effects

Framing influences happen inside a psychological environment. Cultural norms, personality traits, party affiliation, and other established dispositional effects also have an impact on attributions of responsibility. Broadly, the bigger the inconsistency between the attributions proposed by episodic or thematic framing and the viewer's predisposition, the more fragile the effect of the news and vice versa. Attribution of responsibility likewise hinge on the predominant upsurge of news coverage<sup>8</sup>. The news media accomplish substantially beyond influencing the agenda and characteristics of issues in our day-to-day realities. By giving more coverage to some subjects yet discounting the rest, prominent mass media influence principles used to weigh policies and government offices.<sup>8</sup> Thematic and episodic frames have also been linked to stigmatization of and blame of people affected by specific issues. While episodic frames are known to create or increase stigma, thematic frames are known to desigmatise<sup>8,19</sup>. These in turn are said to translate to individual and societal responsibility. When issues are stigmatized, it is hard to rally the society behind or adopt appropriate solutions.

## Ownership of news organisations and framing

Ownership and the commercial motivation of news organisations form possible conflicts of interest that might affect particular editorial processes. It is commonly reasoned that powers outside news organisations relatively affect the level of journalistic independence and journalists' interpretations in consequence influencing public perceptions<sup>16</sup>. Media attention is subsequently a significant characteristic of the information "system because it indicates the urgencies of policy and lawmakers to people in the audience, and the urgencies of the audience to lawmakers" (p. 68). Since it forms both elite and public behaviour, media attention is a variable of importance in numerous investigations in politics and mass communication<sup>20</sup>. Framing therefore demonstrates that meticulous attention to the particular content of media topics affords exhaustive comprehension of the opinions ingrained in the specific pictures in our heads. Once the agendas of the mass media and the public contain thematic or episodic frames, the created pictures in the news can cause powerful emotions, feelings, or change in opinions. Entman referred to framing as a scattered theory in terms of conceptualisation<sup>21</sup>. He argued that many framing studies lack distinctive theoretical descriptions, in addition to depending on "context

specific instead of generally applicable operationalisations" (p. 56). Entman recommended a development of standard definition which possibly could facilitate the establishment of framing as a formidable research approach. On the hand, Caciatore and colleagues lamented about the fact that most studies, even after continuous discussions, still apply generic frames, filled with lapses<sup>22</sup>. The: "ambiguities surrounding how we conceptualise and therefore operationalise framing have begun to overlap with other media effects models to a point that is dysfunctional...ambiguity around framing begins with lack of consistency around how the concept is defined or how these definitions connect with explanatory models underlying the theory" (p.8).

This research examines the study of thematic, episodic, and mixed frames, following Iyengar's<sup>7</sup> definition and usage, in long standing social issues such as HIV/AIDS taking note of how such frames are affected by other factors such as social, economic, political, and new information (in relation to HIV/AIDS for example). Episodic, thematic and mixed frames draw light on issues of responsibility in society and knowing what affects them in coverage of public issues can be a step in understanding how to address social or public issues. Research questions

1. To what extent were the thematic, episodic and mixed frames used in HIV/AIDS stories between 1992 - 2011?
2. What changes were noted in usage of thematic, episodic and mixed frames during the period of study?
3. What does the use of these frames in HIV/AIDS mean for attribution of responsibility?
4. How did New Vision and Daily Monitor use Episodic and or thematic frames in their coverage of HIV/AIDS from 1992 – 2011?

## Method

This research used content analysis methodology to answer the research questions. A total of 1,510 articles were selected for the study. The study period considered years from 1992 to 2011. Although HIV/AIDS coverage in Uganda started in mid 1980s, especially 1986 after the National Resistance Movement assumed power, it was not until 1992 that a private daily newspaper, The Monitor, started its operation in the country. Since a comparison about how ownership of the newspapers influences content is part of the objectives of the study, it's only proper that this period is considered. In addition, the year 1992 marked the beginning of the implementation of many structural, social and economic policy reforms related to HIV/AIDS thus its significance. Articles

were drawn from January 1992 to December 31, 2011 from two national daily newspapers: the government owned New Vision and privately owned Monitor. The twenty-year time period was chosen for several reasons. First, only three studies of print media coverage in Uganda had previously been conducted, all of which were limited to a period of not more than four years. This study, therefore, investigated a longer period of time to provide a more comprehensive picture of how HIV/AIDS and its responsibility was framed in Uganda from 1992 - 2011.

#### THE NEW VISION

The New Vision was established in 1986. It has grown into a multimedia business focusing on newspapers, magazines, television, Internet publishing and radio broadcasting.<sup>23</sup> The paper has a daily circulation of over 38,000 copies countrywide. Although the government owns it, the paper is enjoined by the act of parliament to remain editorially independent. As such, The New Vision claims that it runs balanced information and reports all facts while leaving the opinion of the matter to the readers

#### THE DAILY MONITOR

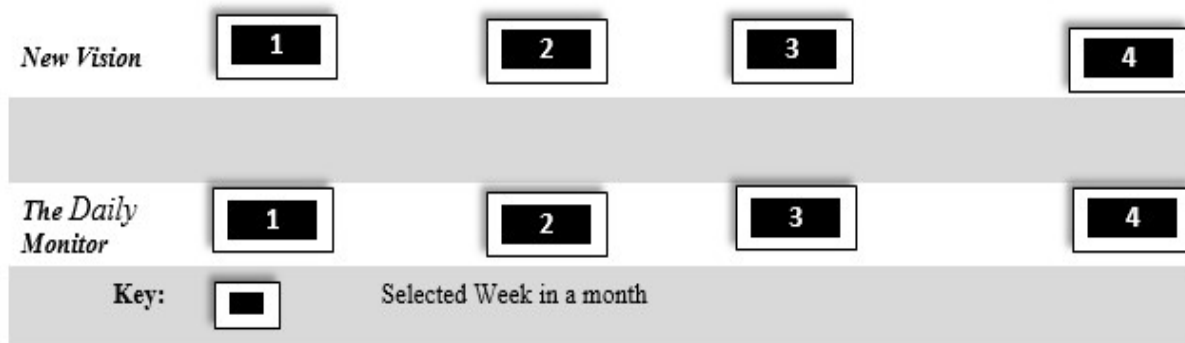
The Monitor was established in 1992 as an independent daily newspaper but was renamed in June 2005 as The Daily Monitor. It has a daily

nationalwide circulation of over 32, 000 copies.<sup>24</sup> The Daily Monitor refers to itself as “Uganda’s favourite and only independent paper”.<sup>25</sup> It is highly critical of government and the president resulting into being labelled an enemy of the state.<sup>26</sup> The two newspapers have been chosen for the study because they are the main, daily print media in the country and command the largest readership.

#### Article selection and data collection

The figure below shows the initial newspaper selection plan per month and subsequently the number of newspapers that were expected in the entire period under study.

Two thousand and eighty newspapers were expected to be sampled for the period under study (20 years). That implied that one thousand and forty newspapers were to be sampled from each. Each year, one hundred and four newspapers were to be collected from both the New Vision and The Daily Monitor, fifty-two from each. The grid below explains that within a month, eight newspapers would be sampled; a newspaper per every week from each publication. The assumption was that at least one article about HIV/AIDS would be found in each newspaper per week. This would mean that the expected number of articles were at least two thousand and eighty (2080).



**Figure 1:** The initial data collection plan.

Although the research followed the directions in figure 1 above, there were some challenges, especially with *The Daily Monitor* newspaper. *New Vision* and *The Daily Monitor* archives were searched for newspapers that were published between January 1992 and December 2011. By 1992, the *New Vision* had already started daily publication so two days per week were selected: Monday and Friday. The researchers searched the whole issue for an HIV/AIDS news articles. For *The Daily Monitor*, available issues started from July 1992.

A search in *Daily Monitor* archives as well as those of Makerere University and Uganda Management Institute libraries was done to find issues between January and June 1992 but in vain. For *The Daily Monitor* therefore, coding started in July 1992 while *New Vision* started in January. Also, *The Monitor* started with a weekly issue before proceeding to publishing twice a week up to late 1993. So for all the time *The Monitor* published weekly or twice a week all issues were checked for articles. After which, starting 1994, *The Daily Monitor* started to publish daily and two issues were considered per week, just like its counterpart: *The*

New Vision. Monday and Thursday or Friday were selected. If a particular day was missing, the next available day was selected. For example, if a Monday issue was missing, a Tuesday issue was selected for inclusion. However, such instances were uncommon. Moreover, only articles that were more than 200 words long were included for coding.

#### CODING RELIABILITY

Fourteen percent (14%) of the sample was randomly selected for the calculation of intercoder reliability test<sup>27 28 29</sup> recommended coding between 10 to 15 percent of the sample for inter-coder reliability. A total of 200 articles out of 1,510 were coded for inter-coder reliability test. All the reliability coefficients met the recommendation (above .80) set<sup>27,30</sup>

The reliability test results for all categories were  $Kappa=.9085$  with a 95% confidence interval (.9085, .9416). After inter-coder reliability, any other disagreements were addressed before actual coding started and any other questions that arose during coding were addressed in the process given the presence of the principle researcher.

#### VALIDITY

Though episodic and thematic frames followed<sup>7 8</sup> description, it was important to develop the codebook and the frames thereof, to understand these frames from an HIV/AIDS perspective but also, most importantly, to contextualize the issue to Ugandan perspectives. Semantic validity was also ensured since the HIV/AIDS context in Uganda in particular was taken into account and both the research assistants and principle researcher were also Ugandan. Also, the category scheme was tested by two independent coders. These were separate from the research team and were contracted specifically to test the coding scheme for precision and thoroughness. Feedback from independent coders was discussed by the research team and the coding scheme was adjusted accordingly. Thereafter, the scheme was once again tested by the study coders before coding for inter-coder reliability test. Testing the coding scheme helped to check for appropriateness, thoroughness and adequacy.

#### SAMPLE SELECTION AND PROCEDURE

A total of three research assistants were hired for article identification. All three were male University graduates two of whom had reasonable research experience as they had been involved in other research projects. All three had knowledge of computer applications particularly Microsoft excel. The principle researcher was also actively involved in the research process and identification of articles.

The total therefore was three research assistants and the principle researcher. Categories were adopted from lyengar's study<sup>8</sup> among others and these constituted part of the categories on the codebook. This codebook was used to train the coders. Training, testing the codebook were done to ensure that research assistants understood what was expected of them. It also involved testing research assistants' understanding of the codebook and resolving any issues or questions thereof. Thereafter, research assistants were shown how to search for the articles following which, coding for inter-coder reliability was done.

#### CODING SCHEME

For an article to be included in the study, its content had to be at least 50 percent about HIV/AIDS. Hard news and editorial comments showing the position of the two newspapers were considered. Articles included for analysis were either in the news, features, science/health features, editorials, opinion, commentary, or in the regular column. Articles such as letters to the editor, photo features, cartoons, or news analysis were not included in the research. The entire story was read to determine the presence of the different categories.

The different categories included:

Story ID

Publication 1. New Vision, 2. Daily Monitor

Page placement

Next were the **dominant frames**. These were coded thus: 1. thematic frames (This is when an article synthesized events into an overriding issue and provided background knowledge surrounding the issue); 2. Episodic frames (Articles were coded as episodic when single, specific cases or sporadic cases related to the issue were presented); 3. mixed frames (When the article included both aspects of episodic and thematic frames equally).

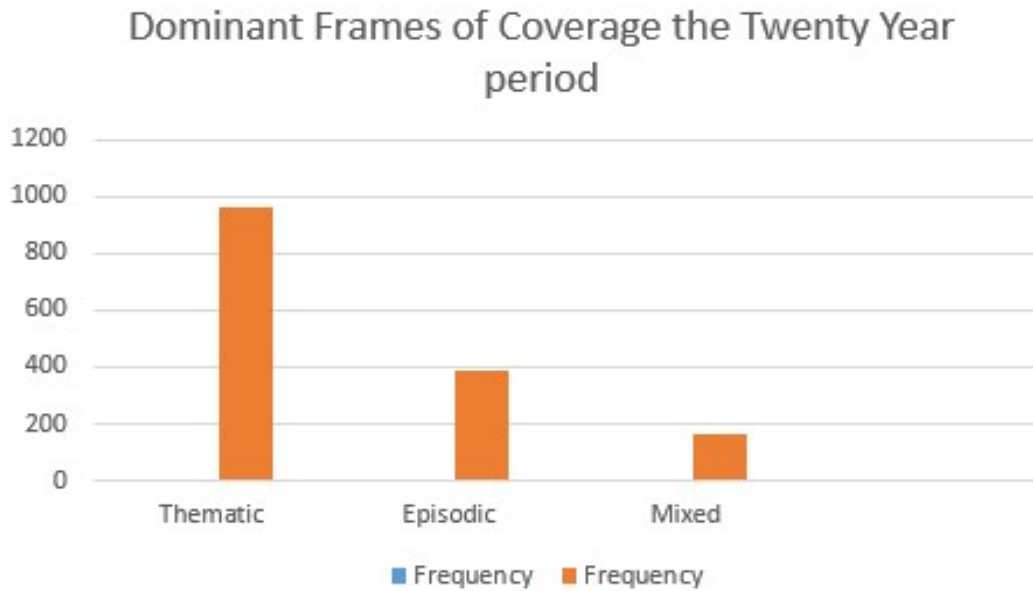
Patterns and trends of HIV/AIDS coverage were part of what was set out to be determined over the 20-year period. According to<sup>27</sup> trends, patterns, and structures of communication phenomena can also be revealed through content analysis by looking to find out which elements precede or succeed other elements. When researchers look for trends, they review how data transform over a period of time, or they seek to find out the way in which data, categories, elements are succeeded.<sup>31</sup>

## Results

Research question one asked: "To what extent were the episodic, thematic, and mixed frames dominant in news stories used in HIV/AIDS news stories?" Question two: "Did differences in ownership of publication influence news frames as used in HIV/AIDS stories?" Overall, the thematic frame was

used more frequently  $n = 962$  (63.7%) in the twenty years of coverage under study in both New Vision and The Daily Monitor ( $n = 529$ , 60% and  $n = 433$ , 67.3%) respectively. The episodic frame followed with ( $n = 385$ , 25.5%), and mixed frame

was the least used, appearing ( $n = 163$ , 10.8%) times. A 2 x 3 Chi-square test indicated a significant difference in the way the two papers framed issues,  $X^2(2) = 9.59, p \leq .008$  (Figure 6.15).



**Figure 2:** Dominant Frames of Coverage.

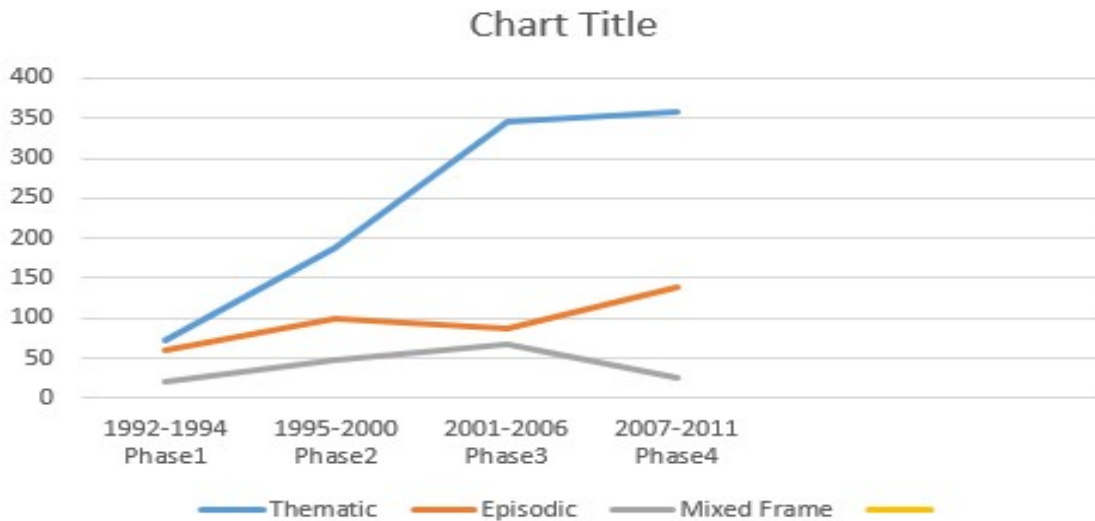
**Table 1:** Dominant Frames by Newspaper

Newspaper	Dominant Frames			Total	
	Thematic	Episodic	Mixed		
New Vision	Count	529 <sub>a</sub>	228 <sub>a, b</sub>	110 <sub>b</sub>	867
	Expected Count	552.4	221.1	93.6	867.0
Daily Monitor	Count	433 <sub>a</sub>	157 <sub>a, b</sub>	53 <sub>b</sub>	643
	Expected Count	409.6	163.9	69.4	643.0

Each subscript letter denotes a subset of Dominant Frames categories whose column proportions do not differ significantly from each other at the .05 level.

In phase one, the thematic frame was the most used frame with ( $n = 73$ ),  $n = 46$ , 68.9% for New Vision and  $n = 42$ , 68.9% for The Monitor, episodic frame was used ( $n = 61$ , 39.4%),  $n = 42$ , 40.8% for New Vision and  $n = 19$ , 36.5% for The New Vision. The mixed frame was used ( $n = 21$ , 13.5%)  $n = 15$ , 14.6% for New Vision and  $n = 6$ , 11.5% for The Monitor. During phase two, the thematic frame was still dominant ( $n = 187$ , 55.8%),  $n = 104$ , 51.7% for New Vision and  $n = 83$ , 61.9% for The Monitor while the episodic frame was ( $n = 100$ , 29.9%),  $n = 63$ , 31.3% for New Vision and  $n = 37$ , 27.6%

for The Monitor. The mixed frame was the least used with ( $n = 48$ , 14.3%),  $n = 34$ , 16.9% for New Vision and  $n = 14$ , 10.4% for The Monitor. In phase three, the thematic frame was dominant ( $n = 343$ , 69%),  $n = 194$ , 73.5% for New Vision and  $n = 149$ , 63.9% for The Monitor. The mixed frame was used more than the episodic frame in the New Vision, in phase three ( $n = 47$ , 17.8%) for the mixed frame and ( $n = 23$ , 8.7%) for the episodic frame. The trend was however the same for The Monitor that maintained ( $n = 63$ , 27%) for episodic frame and ( $n = 21$ , 9%) for the mixed frame.



**Figure 3:** Dominant Frames \* Publication \* Year in phases to show changes.

During phase four, the thematic frame was still the most dominant ( $n = 359, 68.6\%$ ), with New Vision  $n=187, 61.9\%$ , and 174, 77.7% The Monitor. The episodic frame came in second ( $n=138, 26.4\%$ ),  $n=100, 33.4\%$  for the New Vision and  $n=38, 17\%$  for The Monitor.

Lastly, the mixed frame ( $n=26, 5\%$ ),  $n=14, 4.7\%$  for the New Vision and  $n=12, 5.4\%$  for The Monitor. In the end however, significance difference in usage of frames between New Vision and The Monitor was only shown in phases three and four,  $X^2(2) = 32.64, p \leq .001$  and  $X^2(2) = 17.96, p \leq .001$  respectively.

**Table 2:** Coverage in phases per publication

Year in Phases			Publication		
			New Vision	The Monitor	Total
1992-1994 Phase1	Dominant Frames	Thematic	46	27	73
		Episodic	42	19	61
		Mixed	15	6	21
1995-2000 Phase2	Dominant Frames	Thematic	104	83	187
		Episodic	63	37	100
		Mixed	34	14	48
2001-2006 Phase3	Dominant Frames	Thematic	194	149	343
		Episodic	23	63	86
		Mixed	47	21	68
2007-2011 Phase4	Dominant Frames	Thematic	185	174	359
		Episodic	100	38	138
		Mixed	14	12	26
			4.7%	5.4%	5.0%



## Discussion

This study presents a critical examination of how responsibility for the spread, treatment, and prevention of HIV/AIDS in Uganda was framed by two influential newspapers, *The New Vision* and *The Daily Monitor*, during the period from 1992 to 2011. The framing theory is employed to dissect the presentation of this critical health issue through thematic and episodic frames, with a focus on understanding the implications of these framing choices. Various factors feed into media presentation and framing of issues using episodic frames, thematic frames or both. In Uganda, media framing analysis has in the past shown that presentation of health issues, such as infertility<sup>32</sup> can either boost individual confidence or ostracise those affected.

Of the note in this study's findings is the consistent dominance of thematic framing in both newspapers over the entire two-decade period studied. Even when there were changes, none of them were significant. Considering that "episodic framing tends to cause individualistic rather than societal attributions of responsibility while thematic [frames have] the opposite effect,"<sup>8 16</sup> it can be inferred that the issue of responsibility for the spread, treatment and prevention of HIV was being addressed as a societal one whose resolution required the concerted efforts of all, not just those who were affected by the disease. There can be two arguments here; 1. That the people of Uganda had embraced HIV/AIDS and the proposed preventive solutions, suggesting a societal responsibility where individuals infected by HIV/AIDS were spared the blame for its spread, burden and treatment and or 2. That the government of Uganda dictated the narrative about HIV/AIDS in the late 1980s through the early 2000s. The later argument seems more plausible as it is noted that government rallied media organisations and utilised them as agents of change in the fight against HIV/AIDS. The fact that the government of Uganda had an HIV/AIDS education and prevention agenda and the media were particularly enlisted as change agents could mean that the media had to fall in line and promote what at the time was considered a priority. Uganda was in the era of the highest ever infection, a point of about 30% infection rate in some sentinel sites and an overall of about 18.3% in the country; one of the highest in Africa and the world. The media agencies then were expected to rally behind the government agenda, one, as part of the community but two, as partners to help communicate the issue of HIV/AIDS to the public as a problem that needed concerted effort to effectively manage.

The first argument could not hold because in the late 1980s to early 2000s, HIV/AIDS in Uganda was considered a death sentence and anyone that presented with the signs of the AIDS disease was feared and ostracised. High risk groups such as sex workers and truck drivers among others were dissociated from by the community while family members were not willing to take care of those living with HIV/AIDS for fear of being shunned by the community or contracting HIV. The people living with HIV/AIDS were therefore believed to be responsible for their illness. The level of stigma was high. People living with HIV/AIDS were blamed for reckless sex related choices that led to them contracting the disease.<sup>33</sup> The dominance of the thematic frame therefore comes into question. It is possible that HIV/AIDS was deliberately portrayed as a societal issue so as to forge a mindset change for effective prevention because as it is, the coverage did not exactly reflect the reality in Ugandan society at the time.

This can be seen from the messages on 'zero grazing' in polygamous marriages where the people involved were encouraged to be responsible to one another and not 'step out' of the 'circle'. This intentionality in media utilisation and strategy in reporting and framing the issue of HIV/AIDS could be a contributing factor to the lowest rates ever recorded in Uganda in the early 2000s.

On the other hand, while thematic focused kind of reporting may suggest a commitment to addressing HIV/AIDS comprehensively, it also raises questions about the potential consequences of such framing choices. Emphasising thematic framing, however noble, could mask the agency and accountability of specific actors, including the government and health institutions. As Van Gorp argues,<sup>16</sup> the attention given to issues by the media is of significance because it indicates the agency of policy and lawmakers and the audience. By framing HIV/AIDS as a societal issue, there is a risk that the media may dilute the responsibility of key institutions in effectively combating the pandemic.

Furthermore, the study alludes to the influence of political leadership on media framing. Uganda's political leadership, notably the head of state and the first lady, played a prominent role in advocating for HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment. While their commitment is commendable, it raises concerns about media and journalistic independence<sup>7</sup> and the pressure for framing to align with political agendas. This alignment may limit the media's critical role as a watchdog and its ability to hold institutions accountable for their

actions especially because framing assumes that ownership and the environment within which organisations operate affect the degree of journalistic autonomy.

## Conclusion

By understanding how to focus attention on the issue, whether thematically, episodically, or both, the community can better understand how to deal with the issue of HIV/AIDS holistically as a health concern. It is true that other influences such as cultural norms, personality traits and other predispositions have effects on attribution of responsibility but it is also true that that there is power in consistent presentation of such issues by the media as the influence is beyond setting agenda to influencing behaviour and action.<sup>7</sup> Organisations involved in the health sector as well as the media can strategise on the most effective way of framing the HIV issue as it is still a predominant health concern. In conclusion, this study offers valuable insights into how the media framed responsibility for

HIV/AIDS in Uganda during the period under study, with a notable emphasis on thematic framing. While this framing choice may promote a holistic approach, it also warrants critical scrutiny regarding potential implications for accountability and media independence. This study also points to the fact that the relationship between thematic and episodic frames may be affected by other factors. To gain a more comprehensive understanding, future research should encompass a wider array of media outlets and consider the evolving dynamics of media coverage on public health issues. It is important to recognize that this study's scope is limited to only two newspapers, and there is a need for caution in generalising these findings to the entire media landscape in Uganda. The media landscape is diverse, including both state-owned and independent outlets with varying degrees of editorial independence. A comprehensive analysis would require a more extensive examination of a broader range of media sources which perhaps would lend further explanation to the issue of HIV/AIDS prevention and the media.

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