



Perceptions of the Quality of HIV and AIDS-related Communication Materials among Key Population

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Abstract

Exploring the quality of communication materials from the perspectives of the target audiences is essential for the effectiveness of HIV and AIDS prevention programmes. In this context, a descriptive phenomenological study was carried out in Banke district of Nepal to explore the audiences' perceptions of the quality of HIV and AIDS-related communication materials. In-depth interviews were carried out with nine participants selected through snowball sampling from sexual minority people and female sex workers. The participants were partially satisfied with the quality of the communication materials from the perspectives of attractiveness, credibility, empowerment, practical application, behaviour change and privacy. They were not satisfied with their quality from the perspectives of readability, sufficiency, comprehensibility and access. This study suggests that communication materials including precise and illustrative messages with familiar pictures, symbols and language should be easily available to the audiences maintaining privacy.

Keywords: Prevention, sufficiency, phenomenological study, epidemic

Introduction

The outcome of any HIV and AIDS-related communication programme depends upon the quality of the information, education and communication (IEC) materials utilized to reach the targeted audiences. But the findings of some studies have raised questions about the quality of such materials developed and used for



HIV prevention and control in Nepal. Some recent studies (Shrestha et al., 2017; Kakchapati et al., 2018; National Centre for AIDS and STD Control [NCASC], 2018; Deuba et al., 2020; Wilson et al., 2021) revealed that despite decades of targeted interventions including IEC activities against HIV and AIDS in Nepal, risk behaviours of key populations have not been changed as expected and trend of the concentrated epidemic has not been declined satisfactorily. Condom use is still below (61–73% in 2016) an optimal level and varied across key populations who received educational interventions (NCASC, 2018; Deuba et al., 2020). In addition, there is a greater prevalence of condom-less receptive anal intercourse among men who have sex with men and transgender people (Wilson et al., 2021). A study by Kakchapati et al. (2018) also revealed that only about 29% of female sex workers knew about HIV and their knowledge was not associated with safe sexual practices. Since 12 organizations have been organizing HIV and AIDS-related targeted communication interventions with different designs of IEC materials in Banke district of Nepal (Shrestha, 2018), its effectiveness is still in question. Till the fiscal year 2074/075, altogether 1,012 local HIV-positive cases were identified in the district (Gnawali, 2017). People who inject drugs (2093), sexual minorities (3696), and female sex workers (1740) made up the majority of the estimated 7529 HIV-positive cases there (NCASC, 2016).

One of the main reasons for the lack of expected achievement of HIV prevention and control programmes may be the poor quality of the IEC materials utilized in targeted communication initiatives, especially in the local context. It is necessary to assess the quality of HIV and AIDS-related IEC materials from different perspectives to improve programme outcomes as expected. Traditionally, the quality of the IEC materials has been evaluated from experts' perspectives and objectively based on defined quality indicators (Kakchapati et al., 2018; Deuba et al., 2020). But, how the targeted audiences are experiencing the quality of the available IEC materials is not adequately explored in the local context. All the IEC materials that experts and service providers consider to be of high quality may sometimes not be of the same quality for the audiences. Therefore, the communication programme can be made effective only by identifying how the targeted audiences perceive the quality of the available IEC materials, and what kind of quality they want. NCASC (2004) assessed the effectiveness of print media, radio, television, and billboards in HIV and AIDS communication in Sunsari, Parsa, Banke, Surkhet, and Kailali. Though that study indicated the weaknesses in the means of communication and messages from the audiences' points of view, it was unable to provide sufficient information about the quality of such IEC materials from audiences' perspectives. Almost two decades after the completion of that study, adequate studies have not been carried out from audiences' perspectives to explore if there has been a change in the situation.

In this context, the present study was carried out in Banke district of Nepal to explore the answer to the research question, “How do research participants perceive the quality of HIV and AIDS-related IEC materials they have been exposed to?” Exploration of the quality of available IEC materials from audience perspectives has significant implications for practitioners, policymakers and all other stakeholders to increase the quality and effectiveness of HIV and AIDS-related communication interventions in the national and local context.

Methods and Procedures

This study was carried out by adopting the descriptive phenomenological approach to explore participants’ common perceptions of the quality of HIV and AIDS-related IEC materials to which they were exposed. The participants were selected through snowball sampling from adult key populations of sexual minority people, and female sex workers who were exposed to HIV and AIDS-related means of communication, and aged between 20 and 40 years residing in Banke district in Nepal. Initially, the programme coordinators from the Nepal STD and AIDS Research Center (NSARC) and Western Star Nepal provided contact information for the peer educators they had trained across various key population categories. Subsequently, some participants from each category were recruited through these peer educators, and additional participants were identified based on the information provided by the initial participants. In this district, there are an estimated 824 female sex workers, 1709 men who have sex with men and male sex workers, and 639 transgender people (NCASC, 2017). A total of nine participants including five sexual minority people and four female sex workers were selected for this study. Starks and Trinidad (2007) suggest that typical sample sizes for phenomenological studies range from one to ten participants; therefore, the sample size of this study was appropriate. We realized that the data reached saturation at nine participants when new information began to exhibit redundancy. Among the sexual minority participants, one belonged to the Madhesi community, and four were from the Tharu community. Among the female sex workers, two were from the Brahmin/Kshetri community, and two were from the Dalit and Tharu communities. All participants were literate in Nepali language.

In-depth interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide in drop-in-centers and participants’ residences with help of the selected trained assistants familiar with the respective groups of participants. The recruited trained assistants facilitated rapport-building with the participants, translated certain words into their local dialects (Tharu and Awadhi), and ensured participants felt comfortable during the interviews in their presence. The interview guide consisted of 14 major open-ended questions which were modified as per the need of each

interview context. Interviews were carried out in three phases as recommended by Creswell (2014): initial screening interview, main interview, and follow-up interview. Screening the participants, rapport building, informing them about the study, and obtaining informed consent were completed in the first phase. The main interviews were conducted by demonstrating some of the most widely used IEC materials related to HIV and AIDS in the study area and attempted to explore how the participants perceived their quality. HIV and AIDS-related eight posters, one leaflet, one flipchart, and one short video were presented during interviews to capture the lived understandings of the participants to fulfill the research purpose of the present study. In the initial contact with the participants, we learned that they felt most comfortable being interviewed in their own or their peers' homes, or at the drop-in centers of NSARC and Western Star Nepal, and those interview sites were selected based on their preferences. In their homes, participants arranged separate confidential rooms for the interviews, which they already used to meet and share HIV and AIDS-related information with their peers. Some preferred the drop-in centers' IEC halls, specifically designed for and frequently used for health education and information dissemination by the organizations. The programme coordinators assisted in ensuring the interviews were conducted in a confidential environment. Each main interview was digitally audio-recorded and was completed approximately within one hour to two hours. The audio recordings were transcribed in Nepali language after each interview, and the participants were subsequently contacted to review and verify the accuracy of the transcriptions. If necessary, they were re-interviewed to gather additional information. We employed Colaizzi's seven-step method of descriptive phenomenological data analysis (Colaizzi, 1978, as cited in Morrow et al., 2015): transcribe and familiarize, extract significant statements, formulate meanings, cluster themes, create exhaustive descriptions, produce fundamental structure, and validate findings. From participants' descriptions of how they perceived the quality of HIV and AIDS-related means of communication, three emergent themes and 11 subthemes were identified and analyzed accordingly.

As explained by Lincoln et al. (2018) and Meyers (2019), we utilized methods such as pilot testing of the interview guide, bracketing our preoccupied assumptions and experiences, thick description, following transcription protocol, and member checking to reduce any bias and increase the credibility of data collected. Ethical consideration was strictly maintained in this study. We provided a detailed information sheet about our study to each participant and took written informed consent before starting the interview. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained and participation was voluntary. In this article, participants' pseudonyms are used to represent their identities.

Results

The participants' perceptions of the quality of HIV and AIDS-related IEC materials with their different perspectives are categorized under three themes: attractiveness and understandability, information reliability and accessibility, and impact and utilization of the HIV and AIDS-related communication materials. The representative significant statements obtained from the participants' descriptions regarding their perception of the quality are presented and analyzed under the subsequent themes and subthemes.

Attractiveness and Understandability of the Communication Materials

Participants used attractiveness and understandability as the primary indicators to assess the quality of communication materials. They evaluated these aspects by focusing on visual appeal and artistry, readability, clarity and comprehensibility, and the incorporation of local language and simplified terminology.

Visual Appeal and Artistry in the Communication Materials

The participants in this study expressed a strong affinity for visually appealing communication materials related to HIV and AIDS. Reshma, a 25-year-old female sex worker, described her preference for posters, stating, "I like the poster better than others, sir. The colorful images and beautiful letters on the poster are touching when viewed from a distance." This sentiment was echoed by Pyari, a 28-year-old transgender participant, who suggested enhancing the posters with even more vibrant colors and creative design elements. Pyari remarked, "But just like to make these posters even better, color also makes them attractive. They would have been better posters if the status [message] had been typed by drawing flowers."

Prema, a 39-year-old transgender participant, stated, "We prefer posters and videos over leaflets and flipcharts because with posters and videos, we don't have to read; we can understand just by watching them." This sentiment was echoed by Reetu, a 27-year-old female sex worker, who mentioned in an interview at the drop-in center of NSARC, "The images on posters are captivating, and the visual stories in videos are heart-touching. However, the leaflets and flip charts are tedious to read."

While the majority of participants perceived the existing posters as visually appealing and responded positively to their design elements, they also expressed a desire for further enhancement. Participants suggested that all communication materials, including videos, leaflets, and flipcharts, should be made even more colorful and artistic. The preference for posters and videos over leaflets and flipcharts highlights the participants' appreciation for visual content that does not require

reading, emphasizing the importance of visual appeal in capturing attention and effectively conveying messages. Additionally, the suggestions for incorporating floral designs into text elements underscore the participants' desire for creativity and innovation across all types of communication materials.

Readability of Communication Materials

This theme delves into the participants' perspectives on the readability of communication materials related to HIV and AIDS. Pyari, a 28-year-old transgender participant, shared her perception, stating, "The basis on which flipcharts and pamphlets are built, they have been sent making properly." This suggests that participants generally found flipcharts and leaflets to be well-constructed and accessible. However, Prema, a 39-year-old transgender participant, expressed difficulty in reading the materials, noting, "It's a little difficult for seeing and reading. I could understand if the letters [text] would have been a little bigger." Similarly, Reetu, a 27-year-old female sex worker, suggested that both posters and the text on them should be larger for better readability.

While participants generally found the size of pamphlets and flipcharts to be appropriate, they perceived posters as lacking in appropriate size. They suggested that larger posters would be more suitable for public display, emphasizing the importance of readability in effectively conveying information about HIV and AIDS. This theme underscores the significance of ensuring that communication materials are comprehensible to key populations, highlighting the need for appropriately sized text and visual elements to enhance readability.

Clarity and Comprehensibility of the Messages

The participants expressed significant challenges in understanding HIV and AIDS-related communication materials, particularly due to confusing language, symbols, and imagery. Pyari, a transgender, voiced her perplexity regarding the term "Naganya" on an ARV poster, stating, "I don't even understand this word. This terminology confused me." Reetu, a 27-year-old female sex worker, proposed a solution for clarity, suggesting, "To make it understandable to everyone, describe each 'Na' of the Na = Na." Similarly, she expressed uncertainty about the symbol "U = U" on another ARV poster, noting, "That U is equal to U is not clear to us." Geeta, a 35-year-old female sex worker, echoed this sentiment, stating, "I don't understand what is meant by these English words 'Undetectable = Untransmittable' in this poster."

The majority of participants encountered confusion with English terminology used in the leaflet. Prema, a 39-year-old transgender, expressed this sentiment, stating, "We do not understand this English. It would have been easier if it had

been written in Nepali.” Furthermore, participants struggled to comprehend the “Linkages Nepal Project” mentioned in the leaflet, as Junu, a 34-year-old female sex worker, shared, “For the first time, I just heard about Linkages.” Reshma, another female sex worker, aged 25, added, “We cannot understand what the Linkages Nepal Project is about.” Additionally, Junu expressed confusion about various terms like “Sankramit Ragat” [infected blood], “Yoni Maithun” [vaginal sex], and “Guda Maithun” [anal sex], highlighting the need for clarity in terminology. Regarding the poster of PrEP, Reshma remarked, “We are confused about this picture,” while Junu suggested, “The explanation must be written.” Reetu recommended clarity in explaining the usage of PrEP, stating, “It would be clear if explained whom, when, how, and for how long to take.” Similarly, Prema suggested, “The work of this PrEP has to be clarified a little,” emphasizing the importance of clear and understandable information. Chadani, a 28-year-old transgender, added, “It should be written in a way that is more understandable.” Overall, participants found various elements in the communication materials, such as terminology, symbols, and imagery, to be confusing and incomprehensible, underscoring the need for clearer and more accessible information.

The majority of participants expressed a preference for concise and clear messages. Reetu articulated this viewpoint, stating, “If understandable words are written, it may be too long. When writing for each word, it may be too much. People do not want to read too much.” Participants recognized the importance of explanatory and precise messaging to enhance understanding. Moreover, most participants favored HIV and AIDS communication materials that offered clarity and ease of comprehension. Pyari echoed this sentiment, remarking,

The Flipchart is easy to understand and attractive for us to get information about HIV and AIDS. In the flipchart, the explanation is written according to the picture, you know. Those who do not know how to read also know from the picture and those who can read learn by reading.

Revealing the comprehensibility of the video demonstrated during the interview, Sonia, a 26-year-old transgender participant, expressed a keen interest in viewing similar videos. She stated, “Sir, we like to watch such informative videos frequently in the future. From the video we just watched here, we clearly understand the technique on how to convince the client to wear a condom while having sex.”

The participants favored the flipchart for its illustrative nature and the alignment of visuals with explanations, and they found the video more comprehensible. However, the study revealed that participants encountered difficulties in understanding the HIV and AIDS-related leaflets and posters due to confusing language, symbols, and imagery. They expressed confusion regarding

various terms, symbols, and English words used in these materials, underscoring the necessity for clarity and simplicity.

Preference for Local Language and Simplified Terminology

Participants emphasized the importance of receiving information in simple Nepali or their local language, expressing difficulty comprehending English terms used in leaflets and posters related to PrEP and ARV. Pyari, a transgender, aged 28, highlighted the challenge, stating, “English is now difficult for many people. Not everyone who knows English knows its meaning. Therefore, it will be better if it is in Nepali.” Chadani, another transgender, also aged 28, echoed this sentiment, suggesting, “It will be better to print in Nepali. I don’t know much English.” Sonia, another transgender, aged 26, supported this view, emphasizing the need for Nepali translations alongside English, remarking, “Some of us are not well educated. There should be Nepali words with English words because we don’t understand.” Geeta, a female sex worker, aged 35, underscored the importance of local language, advocating for Deshi [Awadhi language] translations, explaining,

It is better to make it in the Deshi language. All speak Deshi in our community, but can’t read Nepali. They do not know what is written in Nepali. So it is better to write in the Deshi language for us.

Although both the flipchart and video presented were in Nepali, and all participants were literate in Nepali, they suggested preparing the materials in their local language for easier comprehension. This sentiment is captured in the statement of a 27-year-old female sex worker, Reetu, who said, “Among the materials we saw, the video was easier for us to understand. But we still request that it be made in our local language.”

The most of the participants perceived English and complex Nepali terminologies as incomprehensible and impractical, favoring simple Nepali and local languages. This preference reflects their desire for accessible and understandable communication materials tailored to their linguistic abilities and cultural context.

Information Reliability and Accessibility

The participants evaluated the quality of HIV and AIDS-related IEC materials based on their reliability and accessibility as primary indicators. From their descriptions, four sub-themes emerged: credibility and verification of information, insufficiency of information and need for innovation, accessibility and distribution disparities, and multifaceted information dissemination.

Credibility and Verification of Information

This theme highlights the participants’ emphasis on the credibility and

verification of information contained in HIV and AIDS-related communication materials. Ramesh, a man who has sex with men, aged 30 expressed his trust in the available information, “Really yes; otherwise, why do such things come from?” Similarly, Reetu, a female sex worker, aged 27 emphasized, “We have to believe it. Some friends don’t adopt because they don’t believe. They don’t try to listen to those things.” Pyari, a transgender, aged 28 revealed that they used to verify the credibility of information from multiple sources, “We don’t believe it all at once. We can be sure whether it is true or not only after training, by listening radio, and after getting information from the authorized person.”

Despite expressing trust in the available information, participants also reveal a cautious approach, preferring to verify information from multiple credible sources before fully believing it. This theme underscores the importance of ensuring the reliability and authenticity of information provided in communication materials to gain the trust and confidence of key populations. During the interviews, we observed that nearly all participants preferred to cross-verify any of the four IEC materials presented to them, rather than accepting them without question. Reflecting on this, we find the participants’ choice to verify the IEC materials from various sources before fully trusting them to be both appropriate and logical, especially in the current infodemic era. Ensuring the accuracy of information is essential to establish its reliability and trustworthiness.

Insufficiency of Information and Need for Innovation

This theme revolves around the participants’ perception of the inadequacy of existing HIV and AIDS-related communication materials in providing comprehensive information, particularly regarding emerging technologies. Ramesh, a man who has sex with men, remarked, “Not everything is enough, you know, but there are some shortcomings.” He further expressed a curiosity about advancements in technology, stating, “I would also like to know what kind of things are coming in the new generation [technology] now. It would be good to share what comes in the new generation.” Similarly, Pyari, a 28-year-old transgender individual, highlighted a desire for information about new technology, stating,

We would like to know about the new technology. We have heard a little that people who refuse to come to the clinic for testing there are new technologies like self-tests and CBT [community-based testing], you know. These materials [leaflet, posters, flipchart, and video] have not included such information.

Similarly, Reshma, a 25-year-old female sex worker, emphasized the need for comprehensive information on self-testing and community-based testing (CBT)

through these communication materials, stating, “We need detailed messages about self-testing and CBT because we have heard very little about these technologies.”

In an interview at his home, Ramesh, a 30-year-old transgender, said with aggression,

We are treated negatively and misbehaved with everywhere. The IEC materials are targeted only at us, not at those who hate us. This prevents us from seeking and receiving related care openly in society, which can lead to the further spread of HIV. So, it’s crucial to educate them as well to treat us properly and respectfully.

Aligning with the verbatim of Ramesh, Prema, a 39-year-old transgender, expressed her frustration, stating, “We face stigma and discrimination everywhere we go, including in our homes, communities, service provider institutions, and even hospitals. Therefore, IEC materials should be developed to provide information aimed at reducing these problems and ensuring a friendly environment that allows us to live a normal life.”

In an interview with female sex workers at the NSARC drop-in center, Geeta, a 35-year-old female sex worker, expressed her expectation: “We cannot frequently and openly come here to get information and care. Therefore, we need more detailed information about PrEP [Pre-exposure prophylaxis], HIV testing and ARV [Anti-retroviral drugs) available on the internet and YouTube, which we can easily search for and view on our mobile devices.”

Despite some information being available, participants expressed a desire for more detailed and current content, particularly concerning new advancements in HIV testing methods such as self-tests and community-based testing. They also emphasized the need for public awareness campaigns to reduce stigma and discrimination against them, and suggested providing detailed information about PrEP, HIV testing, and ARV through internet sources to enhance their access to information. To address these gaps, this study highlights the importance of continuously updating communication materials to meet the evolving needs and technological advancements within key populations affected by HIV and AIDS.

Accessibility and Distribution Disparities

This theme highlights the varying accessibility and distribution of HIV and AIDS-related communication materials within communities. Sonia, a 26-year-old transgender individual, noted, “Posters are everywhere in the organizations working for HIV and AIDS.” Reetu, a 27-year-old female sex worker, remarked, “Posters are displayed in hospitals. It is better to display them in the community too.” Similarly,

Reshma, a 25-year-old female sex worker, suggested, “These posters [referring to posters of PrEP and ARV] have to be made a little larger and stuck in many public places. Everyone has to be informed. People understand the message after seeing the poster.” Additionally, Sonia mentioned, “CBS [community-based staff] from the organizations distribute pamphlets to us in our community. We also take them from here [NSARC].” Participants highlighted the availability of communication materials, noting that posters were predominantly found in health institutions and organizations focused on HIV and AIDS care. However, they emphasized the need for broader dissemination, advocating for the placement of posters in public spaces within the community.

Furthermore, participants emphasized the importance of leaflets distributed by community-based staff, acknowledging their role in reaching key populations in various community settings. They recommended expanding distribution efforts to ensure that communication materials are easily accessible to all individuals, regardless of their location or affiliation with specific organizations. This theme underscores the need for equitable distribution strategies to improve access to HIV and AIDS-related information and promote community-wide awareness and education.

Multifaceted Information Dissemination

This theme highlights the participants’ emphasis of utilizing diverse channels for disseminating HIV and AIDS-related information to ensure accessibility for individuals with varying literacy levels and preferences. Pyari, a 28-year-old transgender individual, highlighted, “There are also illiterate friends. These materials [posters, pamphlets, and flipcharts] are not useful for those who cannot read.” Building on this, Reetu, a 27-year-old female sex worker, proposed, “HIV and AIDS-related information should also be promoted from time to time while broadcasting every program such as music, interview, news reading, etc. from mass media like radio and television.” She further shared her experience:

I like both posters and pamphlets. Because one thing is written on the poster, another thing is written in the pamphlet. Many things that cannot be known from the poster can be known from the pamphlet. I learned many things by reading pamphlets.

In another interview at the NSARC drop-in center, Chandani, a 28-year-old transgender individual, shared her thoughts after watching the short video: “I was confused about the role of sexually transmitted infections in HIV transmission when reading the leaflet, but after watching this video, I now clearly understand how individuals with these infections are more vulnerable to HIV.”

Participants highlighted the limitations of traditional communication materials like posters, pamphlets, and flipcharts for those who are illiterate or have difficulty reading. In response, they proposed integrating information into various forms of mass media, such as radio and television broadcasts, which reach a broader audience and accommodate different learning styles. Furthermore, participants recognized the complementary nature of different communication formats, noting that posters and pamphlets often convey distinct information. The short video presentation was perceived as more comprehensible, effectively reducing confusion created by other IEC materials and providing a clear understanding. They emphasized the value of receiving information from multiple sources to gain a comprehensive understanding of HIV and AIDS-related topics.

Impact and Utilization of the Communication Materials

The participants assessed the quality of the communication materials primarily based on their impact and utilization. From their descriptions, three sub-themes emerged: empowerment and confidence, practical application and behavior change, and confidentiality and convenience.

Empowerment and Confidence

This theme highlights the empowering impact of HIV and AIDS-related communication materials on the participants. Pyari, a 28-year-old transgender individual, shared her experience, stating, “It has motivated me a lot. All the materials [poster, leaflet, flipchart, and video] we read and watched here inspired us just as much as the training previously provided in the drop-in-centres and in the community by NSARC and Western Star Nepal.” Similarly, Ramesh, a man who has sex with men, disclosed his experience, “When there was no information before, it was a little scary. But now I have the information, I am not afraid anymore.” Reshma, a 25-year-old female sex worker, expressed her initial apprehension, saying, “At first I felt afraid that what would happen, how it would happen, what would someone say.” Likewise, Reetu, another female sex worker, aged 27, stated, “It also increased our self-confidence after seeing these materials [poster, leaflet, flipchart, and video] that it is possible to live, there is medicine and we can live a comfortable life like everyone else.”

The participants attributed their decreased fear regarding HIV and AIDS, increased motivation, and enhanced self-confidence to the HIV and AIDS-related messages they encountered. By providing valuable information and dispelling misconceptions, the messages served as sources of empowerment and reassurance for individuals facing the challenges associated with HIV and AIDS. Overall, this theme underscores the transformative role of communication materials in empowering key

populations and instilling confidence in their ability to navigate and manage HIV and AIDS-related issues.

Practical Application and Behavior Change

This theme centers on the practical application of HIV and AIDS-related communication materials in addressing real-life challenges faced by key populations. Junu, a 34-year-old female sex worker, shared her experience, stating, “It [messages] were very beneficial. We are protected from HIV and sexually transmitted diseases, you know. I learned how to wear a condom and lube.” Similarly, Reshma, another 25-year-old female sex worker, affirmed, “We learned about PrEP and HIV testing after reading and seeing these materials.” After viewing a short video “Maya Lagchha” during the interview, Reetu, another female sex worker, aged 27, shared her experience, “I learned about how to persuade the customers who are reluctant to use a condom. I like this video because it is directly connected to our real-life situations. I realized our unity to avoid sex without a condom.” Additionally, Geeta, another 35-year-old female sex worker, expressed, “These materials helped us to get HIV and AIDS-related information, changed our prior thinking, and now we practice safer sex behaviors.”

The participants found the information about HIV and AIDS, condom use and lubrication, condom negotiation, PrEP usage, and HIV/STD testing to be highly relevant to their real-life experiences and challenges. They perceived that these materials not only provided valuable information but also facilitated a shift in their attitudes and behaviors towards safer sex practices. Overall, this theme underscores the instrumental role of tailored and practical HIV and AIDS-related communication materials in promoting knowledge, empowering individuals to make informed decisions, and ultimately improving health outcomes within key populations.

Confidentiality and Convenience of the Communication Materials

Participants displayed sensitivity towards confidentiality when accessing and utilizing HIV and AIDS-related information. Prema, a transgender, aged 39, expressed a preference for leaflets, stating:

I like this [pointing to the leaflet] more. Because we can put it in our pocket and can read going anywhere out. No one sees. When people see it, we put it in our pocket, open it and read on the bed while sleeping, and hide it if others see it. . . . We can get information because other people cannot see and hear what we are seeing and reading.

Similarly, Reshma, a 25-year-old female sex worker, echoed this sentiment, “It [leaflet] fits in a small space; even it can be kept in a bag.” Junu, another 34-year-

old female sex worker, also emphasized the convenience of leaflets, stating “It can be placed everywhere; even it can be kept in a purse.” In contrast, Sonia, a 26-year-old transgender individual, expressed her hesitation to carry a flipchart or poster, pointing them and saying, “These are very large and difficult to carry to our home and village. What will others say when they see it, chhyaa [expressing shame]. Instead, we can carry and read a leaflet secretly.” Sonia further expressed her shyness, stating, “Watching such videos at home or in the community is not possible; we would face a lot of negative comments there. We always watch them at NSARC drop-in center.”

The preference for leaflets over posters, flipcharts, and videos reflects participants’ concerns about confidentiality and privacy. Leaflets were perceived as more discreet and easily manageable, allowing individuals to access information without the risk of exposure to others. In contrast, carrying and sharing posters and flipcharts, and watching videos publicly was associated with feelings of embarrassment and shame due to the participants’ fear of disclosure and negative social perceptions toward them. This highlights the importance of considering the mode of information delivery to ensure confidentiality and respect for individuals’ privacy concerns within key populations affected by HIV and AIDS.

Discussion

This descriptive phenomenological study explored the perceptions of key populations regarding the quality of HIV and AIDS-related communication materials. The findings revealed three emergent themes: Attractiveness and Understandability of the Communication Materials, Information Reliability and Accessibility, and Impact and Utilization of the Communication Materials. Within these themes, eleven subthemes were identified. The first theme encompassed visual appeal and artistry, readability, clarity and comprehensibility, and the incorporation of local language and simplified terminology. The second theme included credibility and verification of information, insufficiency of information and need for innovation, accessibility and distribution disparities, and multifaceted information dissemination. The third theme covered empowerment and confidence, practical application and behavior change, and confidentiality and convenience. These subthemes provide valuable insights into participants’ perspectives on the communication materials’ effectiveness.

The theme of attractiveness and understandability underscored the importance of visual appeal, readability, clarity, and preference for local language in communication materials. Similar to the finding of Nunyenge (2013), the present study revealed that participants expressed a strong affinity for visually appealing materials, such as posters and videos, which they believed were effective in capturing attention and conveying messages related to HIV and AIDS. However, aligning to the

finding of the Nepal Health Research Council (2018), they also highlighted the need for further enhancement, suggesting more colorful, artistic, and large enough in terms of paper, text, symbols, and pictures to make the posters even more attractive and readable for better comprehension. These findings indicate that attractive images and layouts with the right typeface and large enough size maximize the visibility, clarity, and readability of IEC materials (Ojo, 2009; Uhrig et al., 2010). In contrast to the finding of the Nepal Health Research Council (2018), the present study uncovered that participants expressed challenges in understanding terminology, symbols, and imagery, particularly when presented in English, advocating for simplified language and explanations aligned with visuals. Similar to the finding of some previous studies (Ojo, 2009; Namuleme, 2013; Wella, 2015), the present study revealed that participants' perceptions of incomprehensibility were caused by unfamiliar images and ambiguous language in the IEC materials. As recommended by Ojo (2009), participants of our study suggested replacing text in English and unfamiliar Nepali words by using simple and familiar Nepali words and designing the messages in local languages. In present study, participants perceived flipchart and video as more comprehensible than poster and leaflet due to illustrations with clear pictures and explanations in them. These findings highlight the significance of considering aesthetic appeal, readability, and language clarity in designing HIV and AIDS-related communication materials to effectively engage key populations.

Regarding information reliability and accessibility, present study explored the credibility and verification of information, the insufficiency of existing materials, accessibility and distribution disparities, and the need for multifaceted information dissemination from participants' perspective. While participants generally trusted the available information, they also expressed a cautious approach, preferring to verify information from multiple credible sources. This indicates that participants do not accept all messages at face value, which is also supported by the findings of Wella (2015). In line with the findings of the Nepal Health Research Council (2018), participants identified significant gaps in the current communication materials. These gaps include a lack of comprehensive information on emerging technologies such as HIV self-testing and community-based testing. Participants also emphasized the need for messages specifically designed to reduce stigma against key populations, the importance of disseminating more information on PrEP, HIV testing, and ARV through the internet, and ensuring equitable distribution of these materials within communities. They also perceived that the IEC materials were not adequately available in public places in the community. As mentioned by the Department of Health Services (DoHS, 2021), it is crucial to use modern and traditional IEC materials to raise HIV and AIDS-related awareness, and knowledge to promote safe behavior among the general public, especially among the key populations. As

recommended by some previous studies (Save the Children & PATH, 2003; NCASC, POLICY Project Nepal, & Sancharika Samuha, 2004), Participants highlighted the importance of continuously updating materials to address evolving needs and technological advancements, as well as utilizing diverse channels for information dissemination to accommodate varying literacy levels and preferences. These findings underscore the importance of ensuring the reliability, comprehensiveness, and accessibility of HIV and AIDS-related information to build trust and promote widespread awareness within key populations.

In line with the findings of Mathur et al. (2016), the present study explored the participants' perceptions regarding the impact and utilization of IEC materials from the perspectives of enhancing empowerment and confidence, practical application and behaviour change, and confidentiality and convenience. Participants attributed their decreased fear, increased motivation, and improved self-confidence regarding HIV and AIDS to the information provided in communication materials. They also recognized the practical relevance of the materials in addressing real-life challenges and promoting safer sex practices. This finding supports the claim by some previous studies (NHEICC, 2060 BS; Cherie et al., 2005; Rice and Atkins, 2013; Gobind & Ukpere, 2014) that audiences adopt the information in their real-life situation if it is practically applicable and beneficial to them. Moreover, participants displayed sensitivity towards confidentiality and privacy concerns, expressing a preference for discreet and easily manageable materials, such as leaflets, over posters, flipcharts and videos. Participants perceived carrying posters and sharing information on mobile phones as more embarrassing. It indicates that maintaining privacy should be considered a major quality issue in designing HIV and AIDS-related IEC materials. These findings underscore the transformative potential of tailored and practical communication materials in empowering individuals, promoting informed decision-making, and ultimately improving health outcomes within key populations affected by HIV and AIDS.

Conclusion

This study provides significant insights into the perceptions of key populations regarding the quality of HIV and AIDS-related communication materials. The findings underscore the importance of considering various factors such as aesthetic appeal, readability, language clarity, information reliability, accessibility, and impact in designing and disseminating communication materials tailored to the diverse needs and preferences of key populations. Overall, this research emphasizes the critical role of tailored and practical communication materials in empowering

individuals, promoting informed decision-making, and ultimately improving health outcomes within key populations affected by HIV and AIDS. By addressing the identified considerations, policymakers, healthcare providers, and community organizations can enhance the effectiveness of communication efforts aimed at raising awareness, promoting prevention, and reducing stigma associated with HIV and AIDS within key populations.

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