

Predicting Enhanced Adherence to COVID-19 Safety and Prevention Protocols in Ghana through Self-Affirmation: A Socio-Psychological Perspective

Nathanael N. Agah*

Department of Psychology, University of Ghana, P.O. Box LG 84, Legon, Ghana

Abstract

The increasing daily rate of the COVID-19 infections in Ghana indicates that the various initiatives put in place to help curtail the spread are not being adhered to. According to self-affirmation theory, when individuals are presented with threatening health-related message they are most likely to respond in a defensive manner and in order to reduce this, one needs to self-affirm in other domains. It is therefore suggested that by integrating Ghanaian values into media messages on the safety and prevention protocols, Ghanaians are likely to accept and adhere to them.

Keywords: Corona virus • COVID-19 • Television • Media psychology

Introduction

Since the first case of COVID-19 was reported in December, 2019 in Wuhan, China, more than 10 million individuals have officially been reported to have contracted the virus globally as at the end of June, 2020 with more than 500,000 deaths [1]. This infection began as an animal to human infection but has now become a human to human infectious disease. Due to the high transmission rate among humans and the fact that no vaccine has been approved as a cure yet, the World Health Organization (WHO) has come up with specific safety and prevention protocols that would help limit the spread of the infections. These safety and prevention protocols include, washing of hands under running water, wearing of face masks or nose masks, maintaining at a meter distance between oneself and another which is better known as social distancing, use of alcoholic-based hand sanitizers, avoiding crowded places among others. These safety and prevention protocols have been adopted by almost every nation affected by this pandemic and this has yield some positive results as the infection rate in countries like Italy, Spain, England as well as other nations that were previously reporting higher daily cases seem to report a decline in the rate of infections.

The Government of Ghana and the Ghana's Ministry of Health have also adopted the COVID-19 safety and prevention protocols to help curtail the spread of the virus. Advocacy for adherence to COVID-19 safety and prevention protocols in Ghana has been spelt-out on the Ministry of Health's website and other social media pages as well as through various media outlets in the form of skirts or cartoons, use of celebrities to convey safety protocol messages, Ghana's Ministry of Communication updates on every Tuesday and Thursday mornings as well as through the regular nation's address giving by the President of Ghana on COVID-19. However, these initiatives seem not to be yielding positive results since the rate of infection of COVID-19 in the country has been increasing daily. For instance, according to Ghana's Ministry of Health website, as at 1st May, the total number of COVID-19 infections in

Ghana stood at 2, 074 cases and by the end of the month of May, Ghana has recorded 7,881 cases indicating an average daily case of 193 cases. However, by the end of June, 2020, Ghana had recorded 17,351 indicating an average daily increase rate of 315 cases within a month. This indicates that the safety and prevention protocols being advocated everyday by the Government of Ghana and Ghana's Ministry of Health are not being properly received and practiced as it should be since the average daily cases of the virus seems to be on the rise and therefore the need for an effective and efficient approach to enhance adherence to the safety and prevention protocols being advocated.

Discussion

From a socio-psychological perspective, this observance is not surprising as studies have shown that when individuals are presented with messages that are threatening to their self-adequacy, they tend to either reject or ignore or rationalize the message [2-4]. The worst part of it, individuals who are at higher risk of suffering negative consequences to the behaviour in question are the ones that are less likely to accept the health-related message [5]. This could explain why the epicenter of the pandemic in Ghana as well as the first region to record the first case of the virus, which is the Greater Accra Region, continue to record high numbers of COVID-19 which indicates that the safety and prevention protocols are not being adhered to in this region as compared to other regions. For instance, the Greater Accra Region of Ghana has consistently recorded the highest number of daily cases since the infection was first recorded in Ghana. Also, from observation made by the author of this article from major market places in Ghana identified that, a safety protocol like the wearing of masks are not being practiced by most people as they moved around.

One intervention that has been suggested to help overcome this defensive reaction to health-messages that threatens ones' self-worth is the self-affirmation theory [6-8]. The theory posits that individual's defensive reactions to threatening health-messages stems from their need to maintain a global self-integrity, that is, a sense of being morally and adaptively adequate with regards to being stable, capable of free choice, capable of controlling importance outcomes, coherent and good [8]. Therefore, when faced with messages that highlights their shortcomings, in this case, COVID-19 safety and prevention protocol messages, they are more likely to react in a defensive manner. This explains why even in the face of increasing daily cases of COVID-19 in Ghana, the observance of the various safety and prevention protocols seems to be on the decline as most people in Ghana do not see the need to observe these safety protocols.

*Address for Correspondence: Nathanael N Agah, Department of Psychology, University of Ghana, Ghana, P.O. Box LG 84, Legon, Tel +0249809074; E-mail: agahnat68@gmail.com

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However, this defensive reaction can be reduced by enhancing or boosting self-worth in other domains that are relevant to the individual. In other words, people are more likely to accept threatening health-related messages when their attention is drawn to other domains of their lives that are relevant to their self-worth by way of given them the chance to self-affirm by reflecting on values, attributes and actions that they cherish, as this will allow individuals to maintain a sense of global self-integrity as they pay attention and receive the threatening health-related message [2,9]. In Ghana, one of the values that is of relevance is the culture and heritage of Ghanaians. The culture and heritage of Ghana with regards to our way of dressing, foods, language diversity, natural resources, tourism, among others are some of the values that are held in high esteem.

One way of applying this intervention is by inculcating the cherished culture and heritage of the Ghanaian in the COVID-19 safety and prevention protocols messages through various media outlets. For instance, there is this virtual advertisement that portrays the rich culture and heritage of Ghanaians which is shown on a regular basis across various media outlets with the first line of the national anthem "God bless our homeland Ghana" sang at the of the advertisement. This virtual advertisement ends by admonishing Ghanaians to stay safe. This advertisement or video can be integrated with the videos and virtual advertisements containing the COVID-19 safety and prevention protocol messages from some notable and well respected public personalities in Ghana as this intervention has yielded positive results with respect to message acceptance when it is integrated with health-related messages [10]. Practically, the advertisement or video containing the COVID-19 safety and prevention protocols message can begin with a narrative as well as a visual presentation of the rich Ghanaian culture and heritage, then before the video ends, a famous and well respected personalities from sports, politics, music or other spheres of live, will then deliver the COVID-19 safety and prevention protocols message. In doing so, it is expected that viewers are likely to self-affirm with regards to their rich culture and heritage thereby reducing their defensive response to the safety protocols message delivered at the end. Therefore, it is expected that as people become less defensive, they will be most likely to accept the message delivered and this is can lead to actual behavioural change as found by some studies [11-13]. This could result in an increase in the adherence of the safety and prevention protocols put in place by the Government of Ghana, thereby reducing the increasing rate of COVID-19 infections in the country.

This suggestion made is based on the knowledge that the intervention has yielded some positive results from several social psychology experimental studies conducted on behavioural changes in various spheres of life. For instance, there are studies that shown that the effectiveness of self-affirmation on humans' cognitive process such as acceptance to message, intention, self-efficacy, response efficacy, among others [7,12,14-17]. Also, Harris and Napper [18] reported that individuals who were most at risk of the negative consequence of their behaviour benefited the most from self-affirmation interventions. In view of this, people in the epicenter of the pandemic, that is, Greater Accra Region of Ghana, who are at risk the most might benefit from the proposed or suggested intervention. In addition, self-affirmation has had significant positive effect on behavioural change related to increasing the consumption of healthy foods like vegetables and fruits as well as enhanced pro-environmental behaviours such as household waste reduction and climate change related human activities [11,13,16,19-21].

Based on the success of the self-affirmation intervention in previous empirical studies, it is the expectation of the author of this article that the suggested intervention made would yield positive outcome when consideration is given to it. Even though there is no empirical evidence of self-affirmation decreasing the infections rate of COVID-19 as this is a novel disease (the author of this article is currently conducting a study on this), its effectiveness with regards to acceptance of message and actual behavioural change as shown by other empirical studies cannot be overlooked. Therefore, it is expected that implementing the suggested practical self-affirmation intervention in this article would likely increase acceptance to COVID-19 safety and prevention protocols by Ghanaians as well as improve their intention to adhere to the message there by aiding in the reduction of the rate of infection.

Conclusion

In conclusion, consideration should be given to an effective way of improving the acceptance and adherence of the COVID-19 safety and prevention protocols that are already in place since they seem not to be yielding positive results as daily average reported cases of infections keeps on rising in Ghana. It is suggested that the self-affirmation intervention can be an effective tool in enhancing adherence to COVID-19 safety and prevention protocols, thereby, curtailing the increasing rate of COVID-19 infections in Ghana if it is integrated into the already existing messages regarding the observance of the various outlined safety protocols.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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