Communicating coping during the pandemic: an analysis of the presidential addresses of Ghana and Nigeria during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Coping is a well-studied concept across multiple disciplines, including communication and psychology. Over the years, studies have identified that individuals and organizations use varying coping strategies to deal with an unpleasant phenomenon. This paper analyzed themes of coping within the presidential addresses of Ghana and Nigeria during the COVID-19 pandemic. We argued that an investigation into these important official documents from the two Global South countries could offer propagative ideas for the communication subareas of health communication, mass communication, disaster, and crisis communication. After analyzing the presidential addresses, the study identified emerging patterns of African communication systems, social comparison, and politico-religious communication as coping themes embedded in the speeches. The role of the African communication system and implications for collective coping, cultural values, and local resources as agents for national coping strategy are discussed.

KEYWORDS

coping, health communication, COVID-19, presidential address, public health

Introduction

In March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 and the attendant disease COVID-19, a global pandemic (World Health Organization, 2021). The virus was reported to spread from person to person through contact with the liquid particles from an infected person's mouth or nose as they speak, cough, sneeze, sing, or breathe. Consequently, an infected person could experience mild, moderate, or severe respiratory illness (World Health Organization, 2021). Everyone is considered vulnerable to the diseases; however, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2019) cautioned that older people and persons with underlying medical conditions such as diabetes, obesity, cardiovascular disease, chronic respiratory disease, chronic kidney disease, and cancer were at significant risk of contraction and mortality.

To curb the spread of the virus, WHO recommended several strategies, including educating the public on the characteristics of the virus, maintaining a safe distance from others, wearing masks, frequent washing of hands, and or using alcohol-based sanitizer to rub hands (World Health Organization, 2021). To limit the spread of the virus, nations and states around the world, including Ghana and Nigeria, instituted measures such as limiting people's ability to leave their homes and interact freely which became known as lockdown. The lockdown, in part, became a temporal mitigation strategy that would slow the spread of the

disease while governments and public health practitioners worked toward finding a lasting solution.

Different governments continued to respond to the pandemic by adopting diverse tactics to save lives and protect the public health system. Hale et al. (2021) mentioned effective government communication as an essential strategy to manage the pandemic effectively. For example, in Nigeria and Ghana, the presidents announced restriction of movement in a presidential address barely 1 month after the country recorded its first case. The lockdown was communicated in an address to the nations and explained that the government, via public health officials, would quarantine, identify, contact-trace, and isolate all individuals who may have encountered affected persons. The address also hinted at what would later become the nation's public health crisis mitigation and coping strategy for the pandemic (Muanya et al., 2020). The strategy involved providing periodic updates via presidential addresses that would provide information on the nation's infection, hospitalization, mortality rates, and measures taken against the spread of the virus.

The Ghana government's approach to managing the pandemic included the Health Minister's briefing, a dedicated website to publish pandemic-related information, and, most importantly, periodic presidential addresses. These addresses were aired via traditional and social media platforms. They communicated insights into the country's case count, measures to reduce the infection rate, and the national strategy to help citizens cope with the pandemic.

To illuminate the communicative messages of coping in the presidential addresses, the study curated and subjected the transcripts of the presidential addresses of Nigeria (Former President Muhammadu Buhari) and Ghana (Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo) to thematic investigation to identify emerging coping patterns for analysis and interpretation.

Literature review

The concept of coping

Over the last decade, research on coping, resilience, and mental health has increased tremendously. Aldwin and Revenson (1987) have noted the concerted effort by researchers to understand how individuals cope and manage stress. Coping is a conceptual designation often used interchangeably to describe concepts like defense, adaptation, and mastery (White, 1974). This outlook has drawn behavior science researchers to specify a working definition for the term. In a study concerning the structure of coping, Pearlin and Schooler (1978) designate the term as a form of response to an external life discomfort that serves to prevent, avoid, or control emotional and psychological upset. This definition, albeit useful, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) have noted the limiting effect of its conceptualization. The authors rue the inherent restriction of the definition to a trait-oriented rather than a process-oriented endeavor. Consequently, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) define coping as "constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person" (p. 141).

This definition highlights the importance of analyzing the demands of an appraised event or situation and the realization that it exceeds the resources of an individual. It also includes efforts to

manage or bring the situation under control, a departure from the concept that coping is synonymous with mastery (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Although the definitions mentioned above differ in concept, they both contain a common denominator—response to external distress which is a key component in describing the phenomenon. This designation accounts for the utility of the term within behavior science scholarship. For instance, from the perspective of personality traits, Folkman (1992) and Carver and Connor-Smith (2010) investigated the extent to which coping accounts for individual differences in response to stress and the systems through which individual coping behaviors can abate harmful physical and psychological effects.

From a community perspective, Veerman and Ganzevoort (2001) recommended transposing individual concepts and theories, such as trauma and identity, to study collective/community coping. In designing a conceptual model to study communities coping with change, Kelly and Steed (2004) found that the characteristics of a community, including social, economic, political, and environmental indicators, are associated with employing both emotion-focused and problem-focused collective coping strategies. Their finding suggests that coping should be conceptualized as a process rather than an event. To elucidate this idea, we reviewed literature from the communication subareas of health and disaster communication, and cultural studies to obtain insights into how cultural practices and other community characteristics could influence individual and collective coping mechanisms.

Coping and community disaster communication

Coping is a mitigation strategy usually adopted by individuals and communities before, during, and after a negative occurrence to reduce an incident's physical, psychological, and behavioral destructive impact (Spialek and Houston, 2018). Usually, researchers theorize disaster coping strategies in line with the established disaster phases—pre-event, event, and post-event (Houston, 2012). Therefore, disaster coping efforts are often targeted at specific disaster phases to achieve a specified public health outcome. For example, during the pre-event phase, individuals may undertake problem-focused coping, such as undertaking disaster preparedness exercises, or engage in emotion-focused coping by reflecting on their personal or spiritual growth in the post-event phase (Spialek and Houston, 2018).

In some cases, individuals and organizations rely on communication to build resilience and cope with negative events (Reynolds and Seeger, 2005). Spialek and Houston (2018) attribute the centrality of communication in community disaster coping to its usefulness in helping individuals appraise a disaster, facilitate disaster coping behaviors, and constitute disaster coping efforts. Researchers have proposed different frameworks to theorize community disaster communication. Houston et al. (2015) adopted a multi-disciplinary approach to conceptualize community disaster communication. Their approach touched on the communication subareas of public relations and strategic communication. In this framework, the communication ecology offers what they termed a "multimodal" approach where all forms of communication, including interpersonal, mediated, and organizational, are drawn upon to provide an expansive perspective of community disaster communication (Broad et al., 2013).

Also, Pfefferbaum et al. (2015) developed the Community Advancing Resilience Toolkit (CART). This community disaster communication framework encapsulates community characteristics such as resources, connection and caring, disaster management, transformative potential, and information and communication to engage communities to build resilience. In sum, these frameworks rally around the common idea that community disaster communication is a social collective process requiring the engagement of community members interacting around a common negative occurrence to achieve a desired outcome.

Coping and health communication

The 2019 Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic severely affected individuals and public health systems across the globe. Challenges posed by the virus affected almost every aspect of social life and well-being (Saladino et al., 2020). Among the many health challenges posed by the pandemic, physical and mental health issues became topical among several people. Many engaged in physical exercise and other healthy practices to cope with stress (Finlay et al., 2021).

Further, Labib et al. (2022) found that deliberate exposure to nature during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly, the era of lockdowns was associated with less depression, anxiety, and stress. The study conducted a narrative review from both quantitative and qualitative studies and revealed that people who seek out nature (indoor and outdoor) as a coping strategy experienced increased happiness and life satisfaction. The adoption of coping strategies in pursuit of health outcomes could vary among people in different situations. For instance, among nursing students, Majrashi et al. (2021) identified six different coping mechanisms during the pandemic. These include information seeking, consultation, developing a positive attitude, having positive expectations, staying optimistic, and getting transference. This was revealed after a scoping review of related journal articles on stressors and strategies among nursing students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As the virus continued to spread around the world, it was reported that Nigeria recorded the first COVID-19 case in the Sub-Saharan Region on 12th January 2020. According to the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), the country adopted the strategy it used to manage the 2014 Ebola outbreak. A strategy that attracted commendation from the international community including the WHO. Despite the previous success with the Ebola outbreak, the NCDC considered the possibility of misinformation surrounding COVID-19 a threat to intervention efforts. The center therefore encouraged the government to put up a system to provide regular updates to the public to diffuse any form of misinformation (Adepoju, 2020). Therefore, the presidential addresses provided the needed information that will shape the country's intervention/coping strategies during the pandemic.

In the case of Ghana, the country recorded its first two COVID-19 cases on 12th March 2020. Although these were imported cases, the country soon confirmed multiple cases within a week of the first case from individuals who had no ties to foreign travel (Kenu et al., 2020). Subsequently, on March 16th the government through a presidential address announced measures to detect, contain, and prevent the spread of the virus. Like Nigeria, the presidential address became a

regular feature in the country's pandemic communication and management strategy.

Coping and culture

According to Glazer (2006), culture influences the way people cope with stressors in many ways. Culture influences norms in a way that underscores what is socially accepted among a particular group of people (Schwartz, 2004). According to Johnson (2011, p. 20), "A norm is an abstract pattern held in the mind that sets certain limits for behavior." On the back of culture, it creates a path and legitimizes coping methods. For instance, while collectivist cultures (such as Nigeria and Ghana) may favor community-focused coping strategies, individualistic cultures may encourage individual coping strategies. In this regard, Oláh (1995) affirms that people learn coping strategies that are sanctioned and consistent with their culture. Notwithstanding this wealth of knowledge, little is known concerning a national coping strategy. A strategy hinged on a single source of information—a presidential address to influence national behavior. This study, therefore, is concerned with explicating patterns of coping messages embedded in the presidential addresses of Ghana and Nigeria during the 2020 pandemic—COVID-19. We envisage the possibility of drawing from African cultural practices to identify themes that could contribute to our understanding of collective coping. We set out the following research questions to expound on these inquiries.

RQ1: What are the main coping themes undergirding the presidential addresses during the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ2: How did the presidents utilize the African communication system to deliver the addresses to the target audience?

Research method

The study employed qualitative inquiry to analyze coping themes in the presidential addresses of the Ghanaian and Nigerian presidents during the COVID-19 pandemic. This methodology was deemed appropriate because of its capacity to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns in a qualitative dataset (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The presidential addresses of both countries (Ghana and Nigeria) were chosen for several reasons, (i) the first author is a native of Ghana while the second and third authors are natives of Nigeria. Therefore, our lived experience places us in a unique position to better articulate and expound on these issues, bringing into focus important cultural values from both countries. (ii) The unique yet important characteristics of the two countries in the eyes of the international community.

For instance, the United Nations Population Fund (2023) estimated Nigeria's population to be around 223.8 million, making it the most populous country on the African continent. According to Statista (2024), the country has the fourth-largest economy in Africa thereby making it an important nation whose health and economic downturn could affect millions on the continent. On the other hand, Ghana is touted as an emerging economy with strong democratic pillars for growth (Amoh and Adom, 2017). The country is considered a beacon of democracy on the continent to the admiration of the international community. In terms of messaging and delivery, the study observed that most of the

addresses aligned with the Crisis Emergency Risk Communication (CERC) model. Both presidents' addresses were considered to have met the CERC's six principles of timeliness, accuracy, empathy, promoting action, and showing respect to achieve effective emergency and risk communication (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018).

Considering the economic size of Nigeria coupled with the democratic reputation of Ghana, the study finds that both countries reflect an important image on the African continent and, therefore suitable for a study on a global crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. The study consider the presidential addresses from both countries important data worthy of further scrutiny to unlock alternative perspectives on communal coping—a phenomenon less studied in health, disaster, risk, and crisis communication. The researchers believe the presidential addresses are a rich data source concerning each country's COVID-19 infection, hospitalization, and mortality rate while providing an overview of mitigation measures to contain the spread of the virus. In other words, the addresses became the roadmap for national crisis management and recovery strategy during the pandemic. The implication is that these addresses offered a unified national strategy that outlined the role of government agencies and citizens in mitigating the effects of the virus.

Finally, extant research on coping has focused on developed economies with less sufficient attention to emerging economies, particularly the Global South. To illustrate this point, Henrich et al. (2010) state that existing behavioral science studies disproportionately relied on Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) samples. This predisposition may lead researchers to miss essential data from the global South which could broaden our understanding of human behavior. It might also promote limited coping strategies that do not reflect the socio-cultural essentials of these countries. Against this background, the study utilized data from non-WEIRD countries—the presidential addresses of Ghana and Nigeria during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sampling and data analysis

The study collected the speeches of both presidents during the COVID-19 pandemic from the websites of the responsible government agencies in both countries. Others were collected from local news websites in Ghana and Nigeria. These speeches were national addresses in response to the pandemic. They were broadcast via national and private television channels in both countries. While the Ghanaian president delivered 28 addresses related to the pandemic between March 2020 and March 2022, the president of Nigeria delivered 4 addresses related to the pandemic and its attendant issues. Together, the study collected 32 speeches between both presidents for data analysis. In a single-spaced 12-point font size, the addresses summed up to 115 pages of text and a 56,204-word count. After gathering all the data, the authors met to deliberate on the best approach for the procedures and analysis that would most effectively answer the research questions. Subsequently, the study adopted Smith's (2015) thematic analysis approach. The author explains that a thematic analysis (TA) is a method of identifying, analyzing, and interpreting themes or patterns of meaning within qualitative data. To undertake this exercise, the study employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) 6-phase guide to doing thematic analysis—familiarizing yourself with

the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining, and naming themes, and producing the report.

The initial step in the data analysis process involved the researchers independently reading the presidential addresses and taking notes. This exercise allowed the researchers to immerse themselves in the data to the extent that they could become familiar with the depth and breadth of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). All transcripts were assigned in Microsoft Word format, and the researchers agreed to color-code patterns that would be identified. Also, the researchers agreed to take notes to ensure that all emerging ideas were documented. Finally, these initial ideas were independently coded by the researchers to achieve triangulation.

According to Jonsen and Jehn (2009), employing multiple sources and coders (known as a system of triangulation) to analyze qualitative data is helpful to offset biases, incentivize and validate sort findings, and increase the credibility of the interpretation. To ensure the research questions were answered, the researchers examined the various codes and manually identified patterns by assigning color codes to represent each theme. Codes with similar meanings were grouped and assigned names. This process continued until an initial list of 8 themes was populated. After a second round of review, the initial 8 themes were merged into 3 broad themes namely: African culture, politico-religious communication, and social comparison. Sub-themes were also identified for each broad theme.

Results and analysis

Based on our analysis and research questions guiding the study, both presidents adopted similar communication strategies that reflected the cultural values of their respective countries and encouraged collective coping. The results from this study suggest that communication themes that reflected African cultural values, social comparisons, and politico-religious sentiments became the driving force behind the presidential addresses that sought to drive national coping agenda during the COVID-19 pandemic. We explicate these themes and sub-themes in the sections below.

RQ1: what are the main coping themes undergirding the presidential addresses during the COVID-19 pandemic?

One of the first patterns identified was the emphasis on African culture to psychologically boost the coping capacity of the target audience by both presidents. They communicated this idea by emphasizing different cultural elements in their addresses with greater emphasis. This strategy includes blending religious quotations with political statements and adopting social comparison tactics in different forms to achieve a desired outcome.

Politico-religious communication

Religion and life are "inseparable entities in Africa" (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2014, p. 1). In the addresses, both Presidents communicated coping by referencing religion as a source of strength in difficult times. Virtually all the addresses by both presidents ended with "May God

bless us all, and our homeland Ghana/Nigeria, and make her great and strong." Religion plays a significant role in the affairs of both countries, especially starting from the post-independence era (Umeanolue, 2020; Asamoah-Gyadu, 2014).

Both countries are religiously pluralistic with a mix of Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion. Ghana's president is a known Christian, while Nigeria's president is a Muslim; hence phrases with religious connotations were pronounced at different points in their speeches. The speeches highlighted their regrets for citizens to 'forgo' religious gatherings such as Easter, the Holy Month of Ramadan, because of the lockdown and social distance measures. In several instances, the Ghanaian president cited biblical passages, 'this too shall pass,' which connote mental fortitude and courage. In the following paragraph, the Ghanaian president used an important ritual on the Christian calendar—the Easter holiday, as a platform to bolster his message by calling on the audience to make uncomfortable yet useful sacrifices during the stressful COVID-19 situation. He said.

> Fellow Ghanaians today is Maundy Thursday, and tomorrow, a few hours from now, Friday, 10th April, Good Friday, is the start of Easter, which, for us Christians, commemorates the unique sacrifice that our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, made for our salvation on the cross of Calvary. The season is a good opportunity for all of us to reflect on that ultimate sacrifice and for each one of us also to make a sacrifice for the sake of humanity's survival.

This address was delivered during the peak of the pandemic. A period that hindered the Christian community from attending the regular Easter events in April 2020. To cope with the situation, the president urged the citizens to reflect on the 'sacrifice of Jesus Christ' during the Easter season, connecting it to the sacrifice that Ghanaians must make to overcome the difficult situation. Again, President Akufo-Addo repeated this communication strategy during the Islamic Ramadan holiday. This time he encouraged Muslims to stay at home during the annual celebration with a quote from the holy Quran to validate his recommendation as follows.

> In Bukhari's collection of the Hadith, Book 13, Hadith No. 24, Ibn Sirin reports that Ibn Abbas said to his muezzin. I quote, "After saying 'I testify that Muhammad is Allah's messenger, do not say, 'come for the prayer, but say, 'pray in your houses' … It was done by one much better than I …'" (that is the Prophet). Through analogical deduction, Muslim scholars agree that 'rain' represents danger, and, therefore, the prescription for Muslims to stay at home and pray in times of heavy rain applies to all life-threatening situations.

From this quote, the study identified two coping strategies. First, President Akufo-Addo is not a Muslim; therefore, quoting a relevant Quranic scripture most likely sends a solidarity and persuasive message to the Muslim community that the president, although not a part of his identity, recognizes the importance of the holiday. He then hinged his stay-at-home message on the Quran accompanied by an analysis/interpretation by a respected Muslim scholar. Secondly, the scripture contains messages that justify the unusual practice of praying at home during Ramadan, a popular Muslim festival that usually draws large gatherings at mosques and open places. In this regard, religion was strategically adopted to encourage the Muslim communities to cope with the stressful situation that truncated their regular worship experience.

President Muhammadu Buhari also adopted religion as the fulcrum around which some of his addresses evolved. Although the Nigerian president gave fewer speeches, he used religion to either appreciate the efforts of religious leaders or sympathize with the families of souls that departed after contracting the disease. Below is a quotation from his speech to that effect.

> I will take this opportunity to recognize the massive support from our traditional rulers, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), and the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) during this pandemic. Sadly, the COVID-19 pandemic has also taken, and keeps taking, the precious lives of our loved ones, leaving several homes, families, and associates to mourn. May the Almighty God grant all those who have lost their lives to this deadly virus eternal rest.

The first quote is proof of the high recognition of the role of religious leaders in the fight against the virus. As the highest religious bodies of the two major religions, the president acknowledged their contributions to the fight against the pandemic—a recognition that signifies the importance of both religious communities in the country. The application of religious beliefs as a coping mechanism is a known concept. A study conducted by Walsh et al. (2002) found that religious people or those with strong spiritual beliefs recover more quickly than those without spiritual beliefs do from their bereavement. Against this background, the study reckons that President Buhari's strategy of drawing on the faith of the grief-stricken audience as a catalyst to cope with their bereavement agreed with scientific findings. Further, throughout many of his speeches, the president of Ghana was unequivocal and 'almost certain' in expressing his belief that Ghanaians can only overcome this challenge via two tactics-obeying the government's mitigation measures and faith in God. He expressed these thoughts as follows.

> I have never wavered in my deeply held conviction that if each one of us embraces the safety protocols and we continue to put our faith in the Almighty. The One true God who orders our every step, we will emerge strongly from this crisis. This, too, shall pass! For the Battle is the Lord's. With Him by our side, we fear nothing but His judgment and need nothing but His Grace!

It was observed that President Akufo-Addo of Ghana particularly concluded the majority of his addresses with this scripture—"This, too, shall pass! For the Battle is the Lord's! May God bless us all, and our homeland Ghana, and make her great and strong." These phrases highlight the significance of religion in the affairs of both countries and serve as a formidable platform to cope with the difficulties of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Social comparison

Traditionally rooted in psychology and propounded by Leon Festinger, social comparison theory posits that individuals appraise their views and abilities by comparing them with other persons (Goethals and Darley, 1987). The theory was originally an

interpersonal process but has been extended to group processes (Goethals and Darley, 1987). In this study, the researchers observed that both presidents adopted the concept of social comparison to reiterate their message of "we are better than others" to encourage coping among their target audience. On several occasions, both presidents communicatively compared the characteristics of their situation with other countries, arguing that their current predicament is not isolated. Rather, many other developed and developing economies are also experiencing the turmoil of the pandemic as well. Some of the dynamics that were used as instruments for comparison are expounded below.

Mitigation protocols comparison

Here, both presidents indirectly evaluated their mitigation strategies and corresponding results by comparing them with the results of other countries. Although this was an intervention appraisal effort, it was also an attempt to demonstrate that they were on the right track to curtailing the pandemic. This message could potentially boost the confidence of the populace to have faith in the mitigation strategies thereby encouraging collective coping. Specifically, both presidents adopted the downward social comparison where they compared their country's situation with those they perceived as less effective in managing the crisis.

Downward social comparison is a type of coping mechanism that aids individuals (in this case nations) to reduce anxiety and boost approval when their sense of self seems threatened or reduced by the impact of a negative life event like COVID-19 (Wills, 1987). Usually, the outcome of this process is "enhancement of the person's psychological state" (Wills, 1987 pg. 244). The presidents communicated this coping strategy by comparing the infection rates with other countries. For example, in the quote below, President Akufo Addo of Ghana reiterated the nation's contact tracing exercise, explaining that it is the reason the country has recorded more cases as compared to other countries. He stated as follows:

> Many countries in the world, including several of the developed economies, are not implementing a policy of enhanced contact tracing, and this makes our data qualitatively different and more effective in the fight against COVID-19. Indeed, the success of our tracing, testing, and treating will lead, in the end, to a reduction in the number of cases. That is what we are working for.

At the peak of the pandemic, Ghana accelerated its contact tracing, which translated into finding more cases (UNAIDS, 2021). As a result, the president strategically communicated coping by adopting a downward comparison strategy to encourage calmness among Ghanaians who may have been alarmed by the rising figures. Also, the president used a social comparison strategy to argue the effectiveness nation's mitigation policies. In one instance, he noted that Ghana is the only country in Africa to have conducted more than sixty thousand tests and is ranked number one in administering enough tests per million people in Africa. He continued that their effort has won global admiration, a justification of why the country was not at the receiving end of several of the travel bans imposed by Western countries. In the heat of the pandemic, highlighting these strides in a presidential address could potentially elicit a positive perception of the effectiveness of the government's policies among the populace. Further, in Nigeria, the study noted that President Buhari employed

the social comparison strategy to encourage national coping in his address. Likewise, he compared the morbidity rate with other countries in the following quote.

> Recent reports reaching me indicate that Nigeria is now facing a rise in confirmed COVID-19 cases nationwide which is similar to the second wave of infections occurring in other countries across the world.

During this time, the number of hospitalizations and deaths was rising exponentially in different states in Nigeria, especially Lagos and Ogun states. Therefore, to calm residents, President Buhari contrasted the Nigeria situation to other countries, suggesting that the occurrence is not peculiar to Nigeria. This statement was communicated to reduce anxiety among citizens and, at the same time, boost their confidence in the government's intervention programs.

Also, in Ghana, the president compared the country's mitigation success with other African countries to court justification for his policies. This statement was made during the second wave of the pandemic. At a time when public perception projected the hospitalization rate to rise exponentially in the country. He states as follows.

> Our hospitalization and death rates have consistently been very low, some of the lowest in Africa and the world. The Ghanaian people, mercifully, are not dying of the virus in the hundreds and thousands that were earlier anticipated and predicted that are being seen on a daily basis in some other countries.

Here, although there were cases of deaths recorded during the second wave in Ghana at the time of this speech, the president intentionally compared the country's mortality rates with other countries in and outside Africa where there were reports of daily massive fatalities. With this type of downward comparison, he sought to implore calmness by stating that their strategy for curtailing the spread was proving effective compared to other countries whose case count is skyrocketing despite the stricter measures in those jurisdictions.

Economic outlook comparison

On the economic front, both presidents acknowledged the stress imposed on the economy by the pandemic at different times in their speeches. They compared the state of their economy with other nations, highlighting the positives and demonstrating that their experience was not in isolation but an adaptation to the new global realities. Below is a quote by the Nigerian president.

> The impact of COVID-19 on global and national economies cannot even now be fully assessed. No nation of the world has been spared the experience of different degrees of economic downturn as several countries, including Nigeria, went into negative growth territories.

In this quote, President Buhari first highlighted the current economic ordeal stating that is a global challenge, not a solely Nigerian problem. He stated "Nigeria would continue to adapt to the situation daily"—a call to reduce anxiety among the citizens because of the harsh economic realities at the time.

Local expertise/strategy comparison

Lastly, both presidents applauded their appointees who spearheaded the intervention programs in their respective countries. They praised these individuals for achieving global recognition with a connotation of comparison. In the quote below, President Buhari applauds Chikwe Ihekweazu for being among the 10 global health leaders to visit China, where the disease first emerged in 2019 to obtain first-hand knowledge on the virus.

> Indeed, the Director-General of the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) was one of ten global health leaders invited by the World Health Organization to visit China and understudy their response approach. I am personally very proud of Dr. Ihekweazu for doing this on behalf of all Nigerians.

By highlighting this achievement, he sends a message to Nigerians that the government has very efficient and globally recognized leaders at the helm of affairs fighting the pandemic. He strategically highlighted that Ihekweazu is "one of 10 global health leaders invited by the World Health Organization" to prove that their efforts are recognized globally. Ghana's president also adopted this strategy to encourage Ghanaians that the global health body has consulted their country to offer aid to other African countries to boost testing. This was captured in the quote below.

> Our country has administered more tests per million people than any other country in Africa, and the World Health Organization has reached out to us to share our sample pooling experience with other African countries, so they can adopt this strategy and also ramp up their testing capabilities.

Here, the president compared the country's testing success with other African countries and hailed its recognition from the World Health Organization. He stated that the global health regulatory body has 'reached out to us to share our effective strategy with other African countries,' suggesting that the policies implemented in Ghana have proven effective in the fight against the pandemic. This could be considered a case of social comparison, where the sharing of this information could potentially convey the idea that Ghana's COVID-19 mitigation strategy has proven useful than what may have existed in other African countries.

RQ2: how did the presidents utilize the African communication system to deliver the addresses to the target audience?

Human communication systems are considered complex processes incorporating the cognitive abilities of many individuals and communities spanning several generations. Over time, the systems are fused into the social fabric of a community, becoming a shared set of acceptable behaviors and artifacts (Galantucci, 2005). In Africa, researchers have long established that using traditional communication systems is useful in mobilizing people at the grassroots level for community undertakings and national consciousness. The African communication system is an important entity interlinked with cultural, political, health, and other programs leading to national cohesiveness. The African traditional communication systems are

trusted, and most people appreciate the information they produce (Wilson, 1987). Below, we expound on how the presidents utilized the African communication system in support of the message of the addresses.

Community leaders as communication channels

With the knowledge of the influence of traditional, community, and religious leaders, the presidents recognized the need to utilize these institutionalized and well-respected leaders as channels to disseminate and reinforce their messages. In this approach, these leaders would pass down or reaffirm the president's message to those under their jurisdiction, perhaps in a more persuasive manner. The study noted that calling on these personalities during the pandemic was a common theme in the presidential addresses. In one of his addresses, president Akufo-Addo reiterated the importance of traditional and religious leaders in the fight against the virus in this quote below: "I entreat religious, traditional, community, and opinion leaders to partner with the government in engaging, mobilizing, and enforcing adherence to social distancing and personal hygiene practices in their respective communities."

This clarion call was needed to garner the support of the masses to facilitate nationwide coping interventions. This strategy is corroborated by Wilson (1987), who cautioned that without the participation of the practitioners within the conventional system, no genuine mass-oriented initiative could succeed. Government mass-oriented programs frequently fail, and a large portion of this failure can be attributed to national policymakers' failure to use this effective and reliable mechanism. In this regard, the study finds that President Akufo-Addo strategically utilized the presence and authority of these institutions in his addresses by addressing the personalities behind them and calling for their support. For instance, to mobilize the support of the Muslim community relative to the ban on religious gatherings, he stated, "This is in line with the counsel of the wise, devout Muslim scholar, the Chief Imam, Sheikh Dr. Osman Nuhu Sharubutu."—The leader of the Islamic community in Ghana." Also, it was observed that the possibility of poor policy implementation due to the failure to utilize the right channels was something that both presidents understood. Therefore, they made consistent efforts to utilize the expertise of traditional and religious leaders to help implement government intervention policies. Below, we present the quotes from the two presidents on this subject.

President Akuffo-Addo—Ghana: "Government will continue to engage all religious and traditional leaders, agencies, and institutions to encourage their congregants, subjects, and citizens, respectively, to be vaccinated, to help achieve the 20 million target by June 2022."

President Buhari—Nigeria: "I, therefore, urge all sub-national entities, traditional rulers, religious and leaders of thought to collaborate with the PTF by taking up the responsibility for risk communication and community engagement at all levels."

The above statements suggest that both presidents utilized the African communication system by designating some form of responsibility to traditional and religious leaders to promote compliance among their subjects. This practice corroborates Wilson's (1987) recommendation concerning the need to utilize and cooperate with these traditional African institutions to achieve community cohesion for programs and interventions.

Communicating in local dialects—code mixing

An interesting phenomenon observed under this theme was the use of local dialects in the addresses. In a highly multilingual country like Ghana, the study observed that the president used the Akan language—spoken by about two-thirds of the country (Anyidoho and Dakubu, 2008). The code-mixing pattern observed in the addresses was strategically applied to reinforce important sections of the addresses. For instance, sections that convey instructions on mask-wearing, hand washing, and social distance were notably communicated in these dialects. The following quote is an example of this pattern.

> *Akan language: Anuanom, nawotwi miensa ntem ni, yareɛ no asan ama nihoso biom, enam sɛɛ yendi nhyihyɛ niso, ni titriw, yegyai mask no hyɛ. Mesrɛ mo, nhyihyɛ aa yayɛ ɛfa masks noho, mondiso. Sɛ wofri efiye aa, hyɛ mask. ɛno ena ɛbɛbɔ yɛhu ban, ama yetumi apam yareɛ efri yeman mu.*

English translation: Brethren, for the past 3 weeks, the virus case count has shot up again, and it is because we are not adhering to the protocols, particularly mask-wearing. I am pleading with you to observe the protocols for mask-wearing. Be mindful of wearing a mask anytime you leave home because it is an important factor in our quest to drive the virus out of our country. This pattern (code-mixing) was peculiar to the Ghanaian president, who used multiple local dialects in addition to the English language—the country's official language. The study observed this communication strategy, particularly during the concluding parts of his speech, where he usually delivered a call-to-action message to the audience.

Local cuisine

To connect with the people, both presidents called the audience's attention to take pride in African culture, highlighting different aspects of African heritage, including African cuisine, the value of a collectivistic culture, and the importance of African communication systems in the fight against the pandemic. In his address, President Nana Akufo Addo of Ghana emphasized the value of Ghanaian cuisine to bolster immunity against the virus. An example is captured below. "Fortunately for us, in Ghana, all of these can be found in many of our foods, such as oranges, kontomire, millet, cashew nuts, crabs, plantain, okra, dawadawa, brown rice, and mushrooms."

By courting attention for local cuisine, the president reminded his audience of the availability of valuable nutritional resources within the reach of the populace to help cope with the virus. Additionally, these cuisines are relatively cheaper compared to foreign and imported foods, making them easily accessible to the Ghanaian populace.

Appeal to communal living

Also prevalent in both addresses was a constant appeal to the collectivistic culture in both countries as a strategy to mitigate the spread. The leaders in both countries reminded the citizens about the common enemy—COVID-19 and the need to forge a strong sense of community to overcome the virus. By presenting COVID-19 as a common enemy and a threat to the country, these addresses spurred people to think collectively and move toward defeating the enemy. Several ways to move people to action by appealing to the collectivistic culture were found in various statements. In this regard, the president of Nigeria stated in his address,

> I will therefore ask all of us affected by this order to put aside our comfort to safeguard ourselves and fellow human beings. This common enemy can only be controlled if we all come together and obey scientific and medical advice.

Former President Buhari's speech appealed to commonality by asking Nigerians to consider the safety of others first before themselves. He opined that the victory over the virus is predicated on coming together as one people. Similarly, the Ghanaian president captured this sentiment in his statement, reminding his audience about their collective success in times past and the need to come together again for the common good. His statement is as follows.

> The relative successes we have chalked in winning the fight against COVID-19 have been collective ones, which reinforce my belief that, if we are united, there is no obstacle or hurdle too high to surmount in our quest to build a progressive and prosperous Ghana … We are one people, Ghanaians, and we stand together in joy and in times of trouble.

Here, President Akufo Addo ascribed the success recorded so far to the spirit of collectivism in the Ghanaian culture and called for unity to fight the seemingly insurmountable challenge—COVID-19. The idea of looking out for each other is a major part of the African custom and thus an effective persuasive and coping tool.

Table 1 provides a detailed description of presidential addresses, and the accompanying theme (s) identified.

Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic brought severe consequences to daily life activities. The effects of the outbreak were so severe that individuals, organizations, and nations adopted varying coping strategies to combat and survive the difficult period. Across the world, several governments including Ghana and Nigeria imposed stringent measures such as lockdowns in their countries to bring the spread of the virus under control. To understand the various coping mechanisms adopted by individuals and groups, scholars have collected substantial evidence from different fields to explicate this phenomenon. As highlighted in the literature review, researchers have investigated coping from the perspective of health, culture, crisis and disaster, and interpersonal communication.

These studies have provided an understanding of how communication is immersed in the coping matrix of individuals and groups. In this study, we provide an alternative perspective on how coping strategies are communicated at the national level. We argue that this is a phenomenon less studied, particularly from the global south perspective. Consequently, we conducted a thematic investigation into the presidential addresses of Ghana and Nigeria's presidents during the pandemic to highlight, if any, patterns in the speeches that encouraged national coping. The findings suggested that communicated themes

TABLE 1 List of presidential addresses and the accompanying coping themes.

Type of address	Date delivered	Delivered by	Identified coping theme
1st Address	March 29th 2020	President Muhammadu Buhari	Social Comparison, Communal Living
2nd Address	April 13th 2020	President Muhammadu Buhari	Politico-Religious Communication, Communal Living, Social Comparison
3rd Address	April 28th 2020	President Muhammadu Buhari	Communal Living, Local Cuisine, Politico Religious Communication
4th Address	December 20th 2020	President Muhammadu Buhari	Politico-Religious Communication, Social Comparison, Communal Living
1st Address	March 12th 2020	President Akuffo Addo	Communal Living
3rd Address	March 15th 2020	President Akuffo Addo	Communal Living, Politico-Religious Communication
5th Address	April 5th 2020	President Akuffo Addo	Communal Living, Politico-Religious Communication
6th Address	April 10th 2020	President Akuffo Addo	Politico-Religious Communication, Code Mixing, Social Comparison
7th Address	April 19th 2020	President Akuffo Addo	Communal Living, Politico Religious Communication, Code Mixing
8th Address	April 26th 2020	President Akuffo Addo	Politico-Religious Communication, Code Mixing, Communal Living
9th Address	May 10th 2020	President Akuffo Addo	Local Cuisine, Communal Living, Politico-Religious Communication
10th Address	May 31st 2020	President Akuffo Addo	Politico-Religious Communication
13th Address	June 28th 2020	President Akuffo Addo	Politico-Religious Communication, Communal Living, Code Mixing
14th Address	July 26th 2020	President Akuffo Addo	Politico-Religious Communication, Communal Living
15th Address	August 16th 2020	President Akuffo Addo	Politico-Religious Communication, Code Mixing, Communal Living
16th Address	August 30th 2020	President Akuffo Addo	Politico-Religious Communication, Communal Living, Code Mixing
17th Address	September 20th 2020	President Akuffo Addo	Politico-Religious Communication
22nd Address	January 17th 2021	President Akuffo Addo	Politico-Religious Communication, Communal Living
24th Address	February 28th 2021	President Akuffo Addo	Politico-Religious Communication, Social Comparison
25th Address	May 17th 2021	President Akuffo Addo	Politico-Religious Communication
26th Address	July 25th 2021	President Akuffo Addo	Politico-Religious Communication, Code Mixing, Social Comparison
28th Address	March 27th 2022	President Akuffo Addo	Politico-Religious Communication, Social Comparison

that align with social comparison, politico-religious communication, and utilization of the African communication system are the main coping themes and communication strategies in the presidential addresses. Beyond these findings, the study observed other interesting characteristics that are discussed below.

First, as defined by Spialek and Houston (2018) coping is a mitigation strategy adopted by an individual and community before, during, and after a negative occurrence to reduce the incident's physical, psychological, and behavioral destructive impact. From this definition, coping is considered an individual and community exercise. The study observed that although the presidential addresses targeted their respective nations—which can be considered communities, they also attended to the sub-communities within the bigger community (nation). A feature that is often overlooked or difficult to articulate in mass-communicated messages. The presidential addresses attended to the various religious and cultural dynamics within their respective nations while maintaining a broad national outlook. These findings represent a multi-tier coping mechanism and introduce a new concept of collective coping communication. In this context, we submit that community coping is better achieved if it appeals to existing community dynamics while upholding common cultural values and norms.

Second, the study observed that in a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, access to information and source credibility/authority is necessary for collective coping. This is because as people explore other coping strategies, they seek out and become exposed to diverse information that appeals to their personality. A phenomenon theorized

by Griffin et al. (1999) in the Risk Information Seeking and Processing Theory. The theory explains that active seeking and processing of risk information are driven by an individual's psychological need for information (Yang et al., 2014). The study submits that the availability of varying information on a fluid topic like COVID-19 could create fragments in communities and further complicate the possibility of achieving a collective coping outcome. As a result, a consistent, and coherent, flow of information by the leadership of a country becomes crucial to satisfy the need for source credibility in public communication. In this study, the presidents (particularly, the Ghanaian president) ensured consistent flow of information from the presidency in collaboration with relevant state authorities. This is evident by the 28 presidential addresses delivered between March 2020 and March 2021.

The third characteristic observed is the importance of resources (human and material) to the collective coping process. Generally, individuals and organizations rely on resources to achieve coping outcomes (Luria and Torjman, 2009). This feature was re-echoed in this study by the many instances of advocacy for the use of local resources (human and material) to cope with the stress of the pandemic. We submit that the use of local resources (physical or psychological) for collective coping outcomes has the added advantage of encouraging a sense of efficacy among the target audience. The study revealed that using traditional communication systems is not only crucial for the mobilization of people at the grassroots level for community undertakings and national consciousness as stated by Wilson (1987), but also, for the African communication system, which is premised on the utilization of local, familiar, and culturally relevant

resources. These resources include local cuisine, language, traditional and religious leaders, and the traditional way of life of the people. The upside of using these resources for the presidents' addresses was that the call to action became more relatable and less expensive to be undertaken by the respondents. It also means mass self-efficacy was encouraged in an atmosphere that was familiar to the audience.

Finally, the study coined the term politico-religious communication to denote the rare occasion of combining political power and religious ties or institutions for national mobilization. This combination became manifested in two ways. First, the presidents appealed and, in some cases, designated responsibilities to religious leaders to assist in the fight against the virus. Second, the articulation of religious sentiments by the presidents was an uncommon phenomenon observed by the study. The study noted the effectiveness of this approach in the African context considering the strong ties to religion and religious practices in both countries.

Limitations and recommendations

The study relied on a qualitative review of the presidential addresses. Other studies are recommended to use quantitative methods to analyze the data. Also, while 28 presidential addresses were collected from Ghana, only 4 addresses were obtained from Nigeria. The effect of having an unequal data size from both presidents (28 against 4) prevented the researchers from reporting themes that were identified in only one set of data. For instance, an observed theme like positive psychology which was observed in the Ghana president's address could not be reported because it was not observed in the Nigeria president's address. We recommend that future studies collect equal data samples from both countries for analysis. Also, we encourage the use of data from different parts of Africa (East, North, and South) to obtain another perspective of collective coping from different geographic areas.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic brought considerable stress on nations across the globe. Particularly, there was heightened fear of devastation for Global South countries because of the lack of resources to cope with a crisis of this magnitude. However, with prudent local interventions backed by effected communication strategy, these countries achieved a sense of community coping during the pandemic to the admiration of the World Health Organization.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

EE: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition. AO: Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft. EA: Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft.

Funding

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Publisher's note

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