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AI-Chatbot for HIV: Enhancing Awareness and Reducing Stigma Through Personalized Engagement in Uganda

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email: ijotm@utamu.ac.ug

Mukama Alex

Uganda Technology And Management University (UTAMU)

Email: amukama@utamu.ac.ug

Abstract

Despite advancements in HIV prevention and treatment, many Ugandans still face misinformation, stigma, and limited access to reliable health information. This research explores the design, development, and evaluation of an AI-powered chatbot aimed at providing personalized HIV information, engaging users in a stigma-free environment, and improving awareness levels. The chatbot integrates natural language processing and machine learning to tailor responses based on user demographics and interaction patterns. A mixed-methods evaluation will measure its effectiveness in improving knowledge, reducing stigma, and enhancing user engagement. The study further analyzes sustainability factors such as community involvement, partnerships, cultural relevance, and technological maintenance. The project aims to develop a scalable digital health solution capable of improving HIV awareness and fostering positive attitudes toward individuals living with HIV in Uganda.

Introduction

HIV remains a major public health concern in Uganda, where an estimated 1.4 million people are living with HIV, and national adult prevalence is approximately 5–6%. Despite major progress in treatment access, prevention services, and public awareness campaigns, significant challenges persist, particularly in relation to stigma, misinformation, and unequal access to accurate educational resources. HIV-related stigma continues to discourage many individuals from seeking testing, disclosing their status, adhering to treatment, or discussing HIV openly. This problem is especially pronounced among adolescents, rural youth, and people living with HIV (PLHIV) who often fear discrimination, rejection, or breaches of confidentiality.

Young people aged 15–24 years remain one of the most vulnerable groups, contributing a substantial proportion of new HIV infections in Uganda. Many adolescents and youth still face gaps in sexual and reproductive health knowledge, misconceptions about HIV transmission, and limited access to youth-friendly health information services. Rural communities experience additional barriers such as long distances to health facilities, shortages of trained counsellors, and low privacy in small communities, which further discourages open engagement with HIV services.

At the same time, Uganda has experienced rapid growth in digital health adoption and mobile phone usage, creating new opportunities for technology-enabled health interventions. Mobile phone ownership is widespread, and increasing numbers of young people use smartphones, mobile internet, WhatsApp, and other digital platforms to access information and communicate. This growing digital connectivity provides a practical channel for delivering confidential, low-cost, and scalable HIV education and support services.

Digital health tools, especially conversational agents powered by artificial intelligence, present a new opportunity to bridge information gaps, reduce stigma, and engage users interactively. An AI-powered chatbot can provide real-time responses, personalized educational content, and a safe, anonymous environment where users can ask sensitive questions without fear of judgment. Such a system is particularly relevant for adolescents, rural youth, and PLHIV, who may prefer private digital interactions over face-to-face consultations.

This research therefore proposes the development of an AI-based chatbot designed to enhance HIV awareness and reduce stigma in Uganda through tailored information delivery and supportive engagement. By integrating machine learning and natural language processing, the chatbot aims to respond to user-specific needs, clarify misconceptions about HIV transmission and treatment, recommend nearby testing and care resources, support treatment adherence, and foster positive attitudes toward individuals living with HIV. The intervention seeks to complement existing public health efforts by providing accessible, youth-friendly, and stigma-free HIV information services across Uganda.

Study Objectives

Main Objective

To develop an AI-powered chatbot that provides personalized HIV information and answers to common user questions, with the aim of increasing awareness and reducing stigma in Uganda.

Specific Objectives

1. To investigate the challenges faced by Ugandans in the prevention and treatment of HIV.
2. To apply machine learning algorithms to personalize chatbot responses based on user demographics, preferences, and previous interactions.
3. To evaluate the effectiveness of the AI-powered chatbot in improving users' HIV knowledge, awareness, and attitudes toward people living with HIV.

Methodology

Development Phase

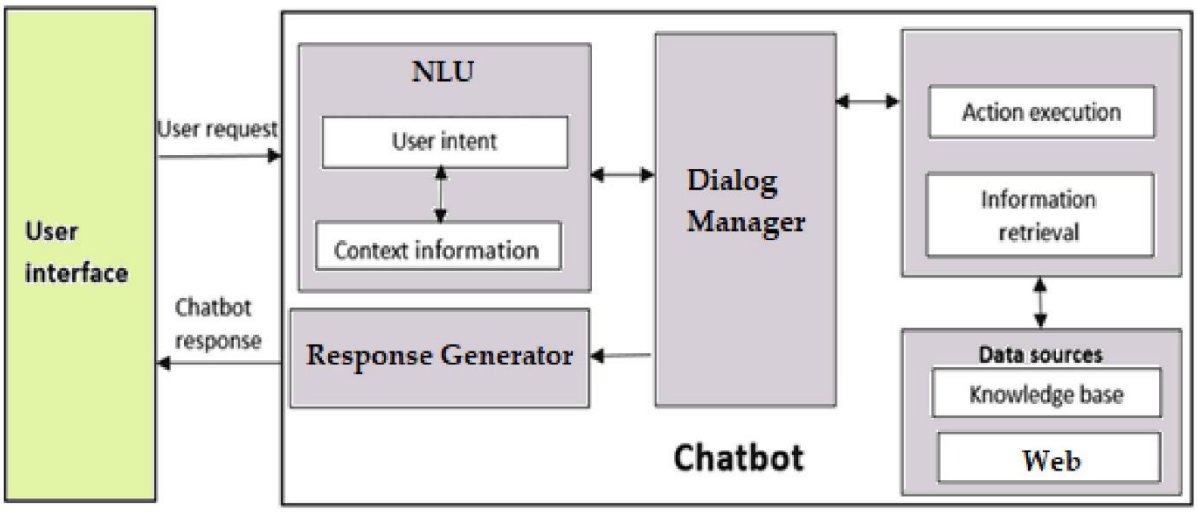
Technology Framework

The chatbot will be developed using natural language processing (NLP) and machine learning techniques. Platforms such as Dialog flow or Rasa will provide the conversational interface. The system will be optimized for mobile devices given the high mobile penetration in Uganda.

Content Creation

Health experts including HIV specialists, medical practitioners, and counsellors will contribute to the development of fact-based, culturally sensitive, and easily understandable content. Topics will include prevention, treatment, myths, stigma, and available healthcare resources.

While the chatbot is described in terms of its functional goals such as HIV awareness support and stigma reduction, the technical design must be clearly specified to allow assessment of the system's originality, scalability, reliability, and practical implementation. Therefore, this study proposes a complete AI chatbot architecture that integrates natural language processing, machine learning, secure data management, and personalized user interaction. The system is designed to provide accurate HIV information, confidential support, and adaptive responses for users in Uganda, especially adolescents, rural youth, and people living with HIV (PLHIV).



User Testing NLP Pipeline

Pilot testing will be conducted with target groups such as youth, community health workers, and patients from Hoima Regional Referral Hospital. Their feedback will guide improvements in content relevance, usability, and clarity.

User Input → Text Cleaning → Language Detection → Intent Classification → Entity Extraction → Context Tracking → Knowledge Retrieval → Personalized Response → Feedback Logging

Datasets for Training

The chatbot can be trained using:

Public Datasets

- HIV/AIDS FAQ datasets
- Health question-answer datasets
- WHO health dialogue datasets
- Mental health conversation datasets (for empathy tuning)

Local Uganda Datasets

- Ministry of Health HIV awareness materials
- Uganda counseling scripts
- Community survey responses
- Youth HIV misconceptions datasets
- HIV stigma interview transcripts (anonymized)

Synthetic Data

Generated conversations for underrepresented intents such as stigma reporting or rural access issues.

Evaluation Phase

Although the study proposes that the chatbot will improve HIV awareness and reduce stigma, these outcomes cannot be assumed without a rigorous evaluation framework. To generate credible evidence, the intervention should be tested using a structured mixed-method evaluation design that combines quantitative and qualitative measures. This will allow researchers to determine whether the chatbot truly changes knowledge, attitudes, engagement, and user behavior among the target population in Uganda, particularly adolescents, rural youth, and people living with HIV (PLHIV).

The study should adopt a controlled pilot design involving two groups:

Intervention Group – participants who use the HIV chatbot over a defined period (e.g. 8–12 weeks).

Control Group – participants who receive standard HIV awareness materials such as brochures, posters, or existing health education channels but do not use the chatbot.

Participants should be selected from similar demographic groups (for example adolescents, rural youth, or PLHIV support groups) to ensure fair comparison. Baseline and endline assessments should be conducted for both groups.

Expected Outcomes

The project is anticipated to produce:

- Increased awareness and understanding of HIV prevention, treatment, and myths.
- Reduced stigma toward individuals living with HIV, reflected in survey findings and qualitative feedback.
- A functional, user-friendly AI chatbot adaptable for wider public health applications.
- Improved digital health engagement among target communities.
- A framework for integrating AI tools into health education in Uganda.

Sustainability of the Project

Community Engagement

The project will collaborate closely with Hoima Regional Referral Hospital, community health workers, local leaders, and NGOs. Engaging communities will promote trust and encourage continued use.

Cultural Relevance

Cultural and linguistic localization will ensure the chatbot reflects Ugandan social norms, languages, and local beliefs. This will support inclusiveness and acceptance.

Partnerships

Partnerships will be established with:

- Local health authorities
- NGOs involved in HIV awareness
- Academic institutions
- Technology companies for technical support

These collaborations will enhance outreach, expertise, and access to resources.

User Education

Workshops, community demonstrations, and digital literacy sessions will help users understand how to interact with the chatbot and benefit from its content.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Continuous monitoring will assess performance, track usage, and identify areas for improvement. Regular updates will maintain relevance.

Funding and Resources

Sustainable funding will be sourced from government health initiatives, donors, and private-sector partners to support long-term maintenance and updates.

Scalability

The chatbot will be designed for scalability, enabling expansion to other regions of Uganda and adaptation to additional health topics such as malaria, TB, and maternal health.

Technological Sustainability

Regular software updates, bug fixes, server maintenance, and user support will ensure long-term operational stability.

digital health ethics frameworks. explain in paragraphs

HIV-related conversations involve highly sensitive personal health information, including disclosure of HIV status, sexual behavior, stigma experiences, and emotional distress. In Uganda, where HIV-related stigma remains a significant barrier to care, ensuring ethical integrity in any digital health intervention is essential. The study therefore incorporates a comprehensive ethics framework grounded in the Uganda Ministry of Health Digital Health Policy, the Data Protection and Privacy Act (2019), and international guidelines such as UNAIDS ethical standards. These frameworks

emphasize confidentiality, informed consent, data protection, and the prevention of harm in digital health systems.

Confidentiality and anonymity are central to the design of the chatbot. Users interact with the system without needing to provide personally identifiable information such as names or national identification numbers. Instead, the system uses anonymous session identifiers to manage conversations. All communication is encrypted during transmission and while stored in databases to prevent unauthorized access. Access to stored data is strictly limited through role-based permissions, ensuring that only authorized system administrators or approved researchers can view aggregated or de-identified information. This approach is particularly important in Uganda, where fear of exposure may discourage adolescents, rural youth, and people living with HIV from seeking information or support.

Informed consent is also a critical ethical requirement. Before engaging with the chatbot, users are guided through a structured digital consent process that clearly explains the purpose of the system, the type of information collected, and how the data will be used. Users are informed that participation is voluntary and that they may withdraw at any time without consequence. For younger users, especially adolescents under 18 years, the system includes simplified assent procedures and considers guardian consent where appropriate under ethical and institutional review guidelines. This ensures that participation respects user autonomy while remaining sensitive to age-related ethical requirements.

Conclusion

This research proposes a practical and innovative solution to persistent HIV-related challenges in Uganda. By integrating AI technology, personalized communication, and culturally relevant content, the chatbot aims to improve HIV awareness and reduce stigma across diverse user groups. The mixed-methods evaluation will provide valuable insights into the system's effectiveness and inform future digital health interventions. With strong community engagement, partnerships, and a focus on sustainability, the AI-Chatbot model has the potential to support public health efforts not only in Uganda but across other regions facing similar challenges.

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