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Public Health Challenges in Nigeria: Film as a Health Communication Strategy

By

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Abstract

The paper examines film and its indispensable role in raising public health awareness and in tackling public health issues in Nigeria. It looked at the public health challenges and/or problems that Nigeria is saddled with, ranging from communicable diseases like malaria, HIV/AIDS, Lassa fever, and tuberculosis (TB), and non-communicable diseases and lifestyle-related conditions. Not excluding socioeconomic factors, misinformation, cultural practices, and limited access to accurate health information that exacerbate these problems and make them even worse. All of these things negatively affect national development and the health of the population. Drawing on findings from previous studies and researchers, this study shows the importance of public health communication and its effectiveness in shaping health awareness, behaviour, and policy. The study further contends that film (described as an important and effective public health communication tool), especially in the context of the Nigerian film industry, Nollywood, provides a potent medium and/or platform for the dissemination of health information owing to its extensive reach, cultural significance, and capacity to combine narrative with visual and emotional engagement. The paper shows that films can be a good way to teach people about health, raise awareness, reduce stigma, and change behaviour. Films can make complicated health ideas easier to understand, correct false beliefs, and promote good health behaviours in a wide range of people, even those with low literacy levels, through narrative-based interventions and "info-edutainment". The study also points out problems, such as the risk of spreading false information, high production costs, and the need to be sensitive to different cultures when delivering messages. The paper concludes by highlighting the potential films possess to improve public health communication in Nigeria. However, this won't be effective unless filmmakers, health professionals, and policymakers work collaboratively and strategically. It suggests investing more funds into health campaigns that employ films and making sure that films include accurate, research-based information to improve public health and encourage long-lasting changes in behaviour.

Keywords: *Public health; health communication; films; communicable diseases; Nollywood*

Introduction

Public Health and Challenges in Nigeria: An Overview

Health issues are a concern for individuals throughout their lives, and people engage in health communication whenever they participate in health discussions with others. This occurs through interactions that encourage and support others, sharing experiences related to illnesses, or searching online for health-related information for personal use or for someone else (Lederman et al. 2008).

Nigeria faces unique health challenges that affect millions of citizens daily. From infectious diseases to lifestyle-related conditions, understanding these health issues and their prevention methods is crucial for every Nigerian family (Masslife Healthcare, 2025). Scholars have explored different health challenges that Nigeria faces. Muhammad et al. (2017) did a review on major public health challenges in Nigeria and isolated malaria, low respiratory infection, HIV/AIDS, road injuries, protein-energy malnutrition, cancer, meningitis, stroke, and tuberculosis as major health challenges Nigerians face. Other scholars have provided several other health challenges that Nigeria is saddled with: cholera, Lassa fever, coronavirus, SARS, and Ebola (see Idajili et al. 2020; Kassa et al. 2020); and multiple epidemics such as anthrax and

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diphtheria (see Omojuyigbe et al. 2023; Wogu et al. 2019; Nigeria Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023; Eneh et al. 2025); maternal and child mortality, hypertension, cardiovascular conditions, and lifestyle-related illnesses (Ashaver et al. n.d.).

Beyond identifying the different kinds of diseases and health challenges that Nigerians face, scholars have also discussed several negative impacts of diseases on Nigeria's population health and socio-economic development (see Idajili et al. 2020; Eneh et al. 2025).

A study by Eneh et al. (2025) on the resurgence of Lassa Fever (LF) in Nigeria reveals that despite LF being a public health burden, it negatively impacts the economic costs in Nigeria. Akindokun et al. (2024) and Smith et al. (2024) described the country as bearing its financial strain by struggling to manage isolation centers, intensive care units, diagnostic tools, medications, and personal protective equipment.

Akindokun et al. (2024) further explained that beyond the disruptions caused by diseases and infections to the health care sector, these disruptions extend to other sectors like agriculture, by destabilising the food supply chain; international trade - through export restrictions from affected regions; and largely the education sector. This implies that the crisis caused by public health infections, outbreaks, and diseases cuts across other sectors, as health is wealth and, as such, determines the functionality of other sectors.

Moyo et al. (2023) maintained that health challenges also have a greater impact on workforce productivity and disruptions on livelihoods, as this issue has led to increased absenteeism at work, resulting in economic stagnation.

In addition to the disruptions caused by infections and diseases, as outlined above by different scholars, scholars agree that several socioeconomic and behavioural factors exacerbate the spread of diseases and infections in Nigeria. For instance, NCDC (2023) revealed that LF, which stands for Lymphatic Filariasis, is spread widely in Nigeria due to socioeconomic and behavioural factors.

Scholars also argued that misinformation and stigmatisation are other public health-related challenges most Nigerians face, as these discourage individuals from seeking medical help when they show symptoms (See Njuguna et al. 2019; CDC Global Health 2025).

In the words of Eneh et al. (2025), cultural practices such as bushmeat consumption also contribute to the transmission of zoonotic diseases like LF, and as a result, a multifaceted approach to address the root cause of zoonotic outbreaks in Nigeria was recommended. In other words, and in the context of this paper, film would be recommended as an effective health communication strategy in addressing the challenges of public health in Nigeria.

Protecting your health starts with understanding the risks, and given that health is undoubtedly core to a productive society (Idajili et al. 2020), this paper focuses on how film as an effective communication medium and/or strategy could be employed to create awareness around diseases and infections in Nigeria, as it has the potential of not just entertaining but leaving a lasting impression in the minds of individuals such that it makes them behave and emulate characters, behaviours and attitudes that they were exposed to.

Communicating these health challenges in a way and manner that citizens would easily understand is key to effectively managing some of these health challenges. It then becomes imperative to briefly provide an overview of health communication below:

Health Communication: An Overview

Internationally, scholars agree that the field of public health communication is considered relatively young (see Parvanta et al. 2010; Thompson 2014) and a fast-growing area of research (Hannawa et al. 2014). The origin of health communication can be traced to the "humanistic psychology movement" (Kreps et al. 1998, p. 4), which emerged in the 1950s, connected to the work of Carl Rogers, Jürgen Ruesch, and Gregory Bateson (Kreps et al. 1989). According to Parvanta et al. (2010), the 1960s and 1970s witnessed a convergence of the fields of psychology, medical sociology, and medicine, leading to two distinct paths in "proto health communication": health care delivery and health promotion. The health promotion branch evolved from the communication field's longstanding focus on media and aimed at the development, implementation, and evaluation of persuasive health communication campaigns to prevent major health risks and promote public health, while the health care delivery branch concentrated on researching how interpersonal and group communication influences health care delivery (Parvanta et al. 2010; Kreps et al. 2003; Dupre 2014; Wright et al. 2012).

Scholars averred that health communication, over the last twenty-five years, has witnessed tremendous growth as a vibrant and relevant field of study that concentrates on the powerful roles of human and mediated communication in healthcare delivery and promotion (see Kreps et al., 1998; Thompson et al., 2005).

Over the years, the growth of health communication has been recognised, not only in academic studies but also as a valuable aspect of everyday healthcare and policy formulation. It plays a vital role in shaping health policies on a national level, focusing on real-world and everyday-life communication (Kreps 2003; Atkin & Marshall 1996).

Given the important and indispensable role of health communication to humankind, health communication has garnered global attention and acceptance as both a theoretical and practical field. It is described as a hybrid and interdisciplinary area of inquiry that generates diverse research interests from communication sciences, social sciences, physical sciences, and various professional fields (Kreps 2020). According to Kreps (2020), the field of health communication is organised into five major interrelated areas of study: communication in the delivery of care,

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communication and health promotion, health risk communication, e-health communication, and communication in managing health care systems.

Furthermore, health communication largely defines how public health works in contemporary society. It entails employing effective communication strategies to expose individuals to important health information, teach, influence, and change their choices, both individually and as a group, in ways that improve health outcomes.

Today, visual and digital platforms have joined traditional ones like radio, print media, and face-to-face contact. Film is different from other forms of art because it combines storytelling, pictures, sound, and feelings.

Nollywood: An Overview

Nollywood, the Nigerian film industry, is one of the biggest in the world. It produces thousands of films every year and reaches millions of people in Nigeria and the African diaspora. People enjoy watching movies and films produced by Nollywood because they are used to portray real-life stories and promote African culture, morals, and societal problems.

Nollywood is an African film tradition and industry that started in the late 1980s in Nigeria but has now spread globally, with vast potential for wealth creation and employment. Nollywood, as an industry, is derived from Hollywood in the same manner as Bollywood. It has grown in leaps and bounds, with rapid and dramatic expansions that have virtually overshadowed stage performances and cinefilm productions in Nigeria and other parts of Africa (Omoera et al. 2017).

As one of the largest film industries in the world, it produces a vast number of films annually, many of which incorporate themes related to health, relationships, and social issues, and has an extensive reach across Africa and the global diaspora. Nollywood plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions and influencing social behaviours (Ashaver et al. n.d.).

Ayorinde and Okafor (1996) spoke on Nollywood's legendary rise and maintained that "the idea of video film was introduced formally by Babatunde Adelusi (Adamson), a publisher of a defunct photo-play magazine."

Most Nollywood films are produced in English and different local languages, making them easy for a lot of people to comprehend. They often show places that people know, like homes, markets, places of religion, and places of work. This makes it easier for people to connect with the characters and tales. Because you can relate to the messages in these films, they are more convincing.

Nollywood also has a major effect on how people act in public and what they say to each other. By showing people how they act, think, and live, films can affect how they think about what is acceptable or desirable. For example, movies that show people obtaining medical care, staying clean, or talking about mental health can help these behaviours become more widespread. On the other hand, films that propagate inaccurate information or harmful stereotypes could be dangerous for public health.

Having provided a brief overview of what Nollywood stands for, it becomes imperative to look at film as a strategy in promoting public health communication in Nigeria.

Film as a health communication strategy in Nigeria

Scholars have, over the years, provided several definitions and characteristics of film. According to Owuamalam (2007), films are a series of recorded images, stored in a retrievable manner, and a communication tool that provides an idea from an identifiable source, using its specific format and medium, to share experience with persons serving as its audience or consumers of its contents.

Andrei (2013) referred to film as a movie, or motion picture, a visual art form used to stimulate experiences that communicate ideas, stories, perceptions, feelings, beauty, or atmosphere by means of recorded or programmed moving images, along with sound and other sensory stimulation.

Looking at its potential in reducing health disparities, Chiong-Rivero et al. (2021) described films as health communication tools capable of reducing health disparities and could be effective in addressing negative illness perceptions. This shows the positive benefits of films in correcting individuals' wrong perceptions about illnesses.

In furtherance of the above, scholars revealed the influential power of films as it relates to aiding public health. For instance, some scholars were of the opinion that film has been used as a narrative-based intervention for the dissemination of health information and has been found to deliver behavioural shifts, particularly among under-represented populations where culture has a strong tradition in storytelling (Murphy et al. 2015; Forster et al. 2016).

According to Fitchet et al. (2014), film plays a unique role in contemporary society. It was described as an art form, a language, an educational tool, a method of information delivery, and a vehicle for social marketing, which possesses the power to communicate stories, stir emotions, inspire, encourage action, and redress inequities in health (Fitchet et al. 2014). The statement by Fitchet et al. (2014) suggests that films have the power to influence and persuade individuals and can be used to address public health challenges.

In addition, Bora (2020) maintained that employing films to promote health campaigns creates unimaginable impressions in the minds of the public in ways that other media fail. In addition, Bora believes that films are embodiments of art forms, omnibuses of language, educational resources, relaxed methods for delivering information, and vehicles for social marketing (2020).

In health communication efforts, films are used to provide people with health-related information and teach them while also amusing and keeping them entertained. This is because films have the potential to "info-edutain". As the amusing parts of films keep the audience's attention, manipulation,

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influencing, and persuasion happen without them realising it. This is done through the play approach, which makes the audience modify their behaviour or attitude without them even realising it. This happens without having to employ violence. The film's depicted materials over time shape the audience's health consciousness and mindset. They wish to live and act the kind of safe lives that the films show or talk about.

That was why Ajakaiye et al. (2021) concluded that film has a dramatic effect on the perception of viewers, whether they are conscious or unconscious of this fact.

The above statements show the power of film in influencing individuals' behaviours as it relates to health communication.

More so, because of its age, film is a really effective way to talk about health. It can show real-life health experiences, make complicated medical problems easier to understand, and change how people think about diseases, treatments, and prevention. This article looks at the connection between health communication and film and how films can be utilised to inform individuals about their health and how they can make informed decisions to enable them to modify their behaviours. It can also be used to demystify the complexities of public health and correct misinformation.

Film as a tool for health education and awareness creation

One of the most essential things that films do for health communication is to inform people about health problems and raise awareness. Educational films, documentaries, and dramatised narratives can impart medical knowledge in more accessible ways than traditional textbooks or pamphlets.

The World Health Organisation (WHO 2026), in trying to establish the place of films in health promotion, maintains that whichever artistic approaches are used in film production, there are ways to use them in creating better health awareness. In other words, the contents of film can be tailored to different styles and forms to better suit audiences and influence individuals to make informed health decisions and change behaviours. According to WHO (2026), "Our concept is for all types of films beyond just 'training films' to be used by health promoters to convey knowledge based on scientific evidence, testimony, or an experience in health."

Murphy et al. (2015) and Baezconde-Garbanati et al. (2014) describe film as having the capacity to promote positive attitudes and health literacy.

According to Emudianughe et al. (2024), film can present a reasonable and realistic representation of people. Like other mass media and social networking sites, such as television channels, radio frequencies, Facebook, and Twitter, among others, it can be used to raise awareness of diseases like sickle cell disease and can actively combat illnesses by creating awareness.

For instance, films that are used to portray public health challenges like mental health illnesses, infectious diseases, or substance misuse can help people learn how to recognise signs, understand treatment options, and avoid risky behaviours. Films can reach people with diverse levels of reading and writing skills and education by showing health information in a visual way, as they are compelling.

Furthermore, a study by Akintayo et al. (2017) on how films can be used to raise awareness of domestic violence among undergraduate females in Nigeria revealed that 44.8% of women agreed that movies have the potential of inspiring Nigerian women to stand up against domestic violence.

Another study by Alfianto and Putri (2023) that investigated the effectiveness of utilising an animated film for health promotion to enhance mental health knowledge and self-efficacy among adolescents attending rural schools revealed the efficacy of using films for health promotion in augmenting mental health awareness and self-efficacy among adolescents in rural settings.

Oviedo (2012), in their study that investigated the use of cinema as an extra instructional tool for adults' understanding of HIV and AIDS, verified the function of film in disseminating HIV/AIDS-related information. These further validate the role of film in awareness creation and influencing behaviours.

Social stigma is linked to a lot of health problems, such as mental illness, HIV/AIDS, disability, and addiction. Stigma can stop people from getting medical help, telling others about their condition, or getting help from friends and family. Pickenhagen and Sartorius (2002) averred that stigmatisation of individuals with mental health illness has been identified as a major hindrance to better care and improvement of their quality of life.

Film can help fight stereotypes and lower stigma by showing realistic and caring portrayals of people with health problems.

Film as a Tool for Influencing Health Behaviour

Film can also influence health-related behaviours by demonstrating the consequences of unhealthy choices and the benefits of positive behaviours. According to behavioural research, individuals often model behaviours they observe in media representations.

Health communication interventions through film have been seen as effective tools in promoting positive attitudes and health literacy since they are mass media products and are presented based on experiences. Film is an art that bears the lives of people and shares their experiences and their philosophical disposition to the universe (Emudianughe et al., 2024). According to Mehraj et al. (2014), films have the potential to alter people's attitudes and behaviours.

Scholars maintain that social behaviours depicted in movies and TV shows can significantly affect people's behaviour (Kitsaras and Godwin, 2024); some posited that movies as well as other forms of media, through their wide reach beyond demographic, economic, and other differences, have a crucial role in today's world in reflecting ongoing developments and issues as well as promoting values and shaping behaviours

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(Johnson, 2015); and revealed that dietary behaviours can be changed through films (Rannamets, 2013).

Challenges in Using Film for Health Communication

Despite its advantages, the use of film in health communication presents several challenges.

First, films are often produced primarily for entertainment purposes, which may lead to the dramatisation or simplification of medical information. Inaccurate portrayals of diseases, treatments, or healthcare systems due to a lack of proper research can contribute to public misunderstanding and can lead to fear or avoidance (Etimiri 2024). This underscores the need for proper research and collaboration between health professionals, the Ministry of health and filmmakers.

Second, producing high-quality films requires substantial financial and technical resources. Public health organisations may face difficulties funding and distributing films on a large scale. This challenge underscores the need for collaboration with multiple partner agencies, including policymakers and government, as priority should be placed on public health to protect the lives of citizens.

Third, cultural differences may affect how health messages in films are interpreted. Health communication must therefore consider cultural sensitivity and local contexts when designing film-based interventions- underscoring the need for thorough research and understanding of different cultures, norms, and traditions of a people.

Conclusion

Health communication is essential for raising public health awareness, promoting public health, improving the health literacy of individuals, and encouraging positive health behaviours. Among the vast communication channels available today, film occupies a distinctive place in public health communication because of its undeniable potential to combine information, storytelling, and emotional engagement.

Films can be utilised by storytellers, producers, and content creators to educate audiences, raise awareness about health issues, reduce stigma, and influence health-related attitudes and behaviours by embedding health content in movies. When used responsibly and supported by accurate scientific information, film can be a powerful tool for health promotion and social change.

However, the effectiveness of film in health communication, as the study recommends, depends on a careful partnership between health professionals, the Department of Health, communication specialists, and media producers. Ensuring accuracy through proper research and study, cultural relevance, and accessibility will be essential for maximising the impact of film in public health initiatives.

As the world evolves, and societies continue to rely on visual media for information and entertainment, integrating film into health communication strategies will remain an important and effective approach for improving global health outcomes.

Consequently, filmmakers should be encouraged to create more movies to use in awareness and advocacy campaigns for illnesses/diseases such as sickle cell, LF, malaria, Ebola, etc. and against other public health discrimination and misinformation. Furthermore, the government should endeavour to invest heavily in public health-related campaigns to improve the health information knowledge of its citizens and to enable them to make informed health-related decisions towards better health.

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