

THE USE OF THEATRE IN COMMUNICATING PUBLIC HEALTH MESSAGES: A CASE STUDY OF NIGERIA

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Abstract

Theatre has been used as a strong tool for social change, especially in situations where the literacy level, cultural obstacles, and distrust in the official institutions hinder the success of traditional methods of communication. The paper will discuss how theatre has been used as an applied communication tool in the dissemination of public health messages. Based on the theories of participatory communication, development communication and the practical uses of the applied theatre form, the study discusses the deployment of theatrical forms by communities like community theatre, forum theatre, street theatre and recently the COVID-19 awareness theatrical approaches. The interactive nature that is culturally entrenched in theatre allows it to transform the complex medical information to narratives that people can relate with hence increasing the understanding, retention, and behaviour change. The paper also compares the case studies in African settings especially in Nigeria whereby the use of theatre has been implemented in both rural and urban settings to mediate the communication gap between health authorities and people. Although the study takes into account such limitations as the lack of funding and scale-related difficulties, it finds that theatre is a crucial tool of participatory strategy in communicating about the health of populations. It suggests greater liaisons between theatre practitioners, public health practitioners and policy makers in order to institutionalize theatre-based health interventions.

Keywords: Applied Theatre, Public Health Communication, Community Theatre, Behaviour Change, Participatory Development

Introduction

Communication on health among the masses has been perceived to be one of the most vital aspects of sustainable development especially in developing countries whereby preventable diseases have continued to take away thousands of lives annually. Even in the presence of improved biomedical science, several measures taken by the public health normally fail not because they do not have medical answers but rather because of poor communication approaches. The lack of access to formal media platforms, mistrust of governmental structures, and high illiteracy levels among the people of Nigeria are some of the factors that contribute greatly to the spread and uptake of health information in most African societies. As a result, different and culturally integrated methods of communication have been needed.

Indigenous and participatory art forms such as theatre have played a role in the past as a communal educator, teacher of morality and social control in African societies. Prior to the appearance of modern health campaigns, knowledge on hygiene, childbirth behaviors, disease prevention and communal responsibility were being passed on through traditional performances that included story-telling, masquerade, rituals, and folk drama. The development communication theorists believe that participatory and culturally resonant communication strategies are more probable to bring about behaviour change than top-down information dissemination model (Servaes 75). Theatre, as such, has much in common with the paradigms of participatory development.

Applied theatre has been applied more and more in Nigeria to combat various public health issues like in the spread of HIV/AIDS awareness, malaria prevention, polio vaccination campaigns, maternal mortality, and, more recently, COVID-19 sensitization. Community-based performance strategies have been embraced by organizations, non-governmental agencies, and university theatre to address the gap in knowledge between medical expertise and general knowledge. Theatre, as Boal claims in his imaginary Theatre of the Oppressed, is able to convert passive audience to active audience in problem solving mechanisms (Boal 122). This participatory dynamics when utilized in the context of public health communication enable communities to question dangerous behaviours and develop solutions together.

In addition, the power of theatre is in simplification of complicated scientific facts into narratives that are understandable. Medical terms that might seem abstract in a printed pamphlet can be translated into reality when presented in the form of recognizable characters in culturally viable story lines. According to the narrative persuasion theory, storytelling is more effective in internalizing messages because an audience must be emotionally involved (Green and Brock 701). This process is inherently employed via identification, empathy and group contemplation, and is activated by theatre.

Nevertheless, even though effective, there is a lack of proper theorization of theatre as a health communication instrument in the field of the general scholarship of public health and it is frequently not adequately funded in policy making. The paper thus analyses the theoretical understanding, application and influence of the use of theatre in delivering public health messages especially in Nigeria and Africa. It proposes that theatre is not a form of artistic supplement of health campaigns but a strategic development communication tool that can be used to change knowledge, attitude and behaviour.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design using a descriptive and interpretive approach to examine the use of theatre in communicating public health messages in Nigeria. The qualitative approach is suitable because it allows for an in-depth understanding of how theatre influences health awareness, perception, and behavioural change within communities. The study is focused on Nigeria, with particular attention to selected public health theatre interventions carried out in both rural and urban communities, including Theatre for Development (TfD), street theatre, forum theatre, and COVID-19 awareness performances.

The study relies on secondary sources of data, which include academic journals, textbooks, published case studies, reports from health communication organisations, and relevant online scholarly materials. Data is collected through documentary research, involving a systematic review of literature on theatre-based public health communication in Nigeria and selected African contexts. The data is analyzed using thematic analysis, focusing on key themes such as community participation, behavioural change communication, cultural relevance of theatre, health awareness, and the effectiveness of theatrical interventions in public health messaging. The study is limited to secondary data sources, which restricts direct field observation of audience responses and live theatre performances.

Theoretical Framework and Conceptual Clarifications

Communication in Public Health

Public health communication is the scientific structure and transfer of information that is aimed at changing individual and group choices to enhance health outcomes. Public health communication is at the level of the population in contrast to interpersonal medical communication, which is defined as the interaction of healthcare professionals and patients. It is concerned with prevention, risk reduction, creation of awareness and encouraging healthy behaviours among communities. It does not only aim at informing but persuading, mobilizing and maintaining behavioural change (World Health Organization, 2023; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022).

Malaria, maternal mortality, HIV/AIDS, vaccine hesitancy, and infectious disease outbreaks are some of the most common issues related to the health of the population in most developing societies, including Nigeria, although there are medical interventions in place. Such perseverance indicates that the availability of information is not sufficient to provide behavioural compliance. In the case of successful adoption of innovations, which in this case are health practices, Rogers suggests that, communication should be effected by trusted and culturally imbedded means through a social system (Rogers 18). In the case where communication techniques are not connected to the local realities, resistance and lack of understanding are likely to ensue.

Historically, the mass media has been used in public health communication through radio broadcasts, television advertisements, posters, and pamphlets. Although these channels are able to reach vast audiences, the channel in most cases is a one-way transmission model that does not allow audience to participate. In societies with low literacy rates or where there is lack of trust with the official institutions such strategies might not yield any significant engagement. Servaes criticizes the top-down models of development communication of overlooking the significance of dialogue and cultural involvement by focusing on the participatory ways that enable communities to bargain meanings (Servaes 75).

In this regard, good communication in public health should go beyond the dissemination of information to adopt cultural sensitivity, emotion appeal, and community interaction. The messages being given on health should be done in forms that are sensitive to the local belief systems, social norms, and experiences. Theatre is a cultural and an interactive expression which satisfies these needs. By putting medical terms into the forms of narrative and placing health issues in the context of familiar social worlds, theatre allows people to receive information not as abstract instructions but as a reality experienced.

In addition, behaviour change communication is closely related to the concept of public health communication because it aims at impacting attitudes, perceptions and social norms. The narrative persuasion theory proposed by Green and Brock opines that people will internalize messages better when they are carried to suggestive tales that help bring about emotional identification (Green and Brock 701). Theatre inherently triggers this process by characterization, the struggle, and the collective thinking. When viewers are exposed to dramatic displays of the health outcomes, they both think and experience the message.

Applied Theatre

Applied theatre is theatrical activity that is specifically created to be used in non-traditional proscenium environments and non-traditional commercial entertainment contexts, whose main goal is to create social, educational or developmental effect. In contrast to mainstream theatre, which tends to focus on aesthetic innovation and entertainment of the audience, applied theatre is based on social intervention. It is done in local halls, markets, education institutions, health institutions, streets and rural meeting places, and aims at certain groups and against certain social issues.

According to scholars, applied theatre is performance that aims at transformation and not just a representation. According to Nicholson, applied theatre works in the real-life situations and involves communities in the process of discussing social reality (Nicholson 2). Its advantage is that it is flexible and sensitive to local needs. Applied theatre in the setting of communication about public health uses performance methods to convey the preventive health measures, confront the negative cultural norms, and provoke the discussion between the health authorities and communities.

One of the theoretical influences on applied theatre is the Theatre of the Oppressed by Augusto Boal. Boal rejects the conventional distinction between the actor and the spectator, proposing instead the concept of the “spect-actor,” in which audience members actively participate in the performance by intervening and offering alternative solutions (Boal, 122). Such participatory form is specifically applicable to the field of public health communication since it enables communities to practice more healthy behaviors in a safe symbolic setting. To illustrate, one can create a dramatic scene that deals with vaccine hesitancy, and when it reaches a critical point, the audience can intervene and show how they would react to fake news. This kind of participatory rehearsal makes abstract health advice embodied.

Applied theatre is often in contact with indigenous performance in African context. Performances incorporate songs, proverbs, dance, call-and-response methods, and storytelling to make sure that cultures are represented in performances. Such integration improves recognition and credibility of the audience. Health messages incorporated into established aesthetic forms have a lesser opportunity of resistance and better understanding. Applied theatre thus acts as an intermediary of the knowledge of biomedicine and native knowledge systems.

Applied theatre has been generally applied in campaigns concerning awareness of HIV/AIDS, maternal health, family planning, sanitation practices and malaria prevention in Nigeria.

Participatory drama has been used by university theatre departments, non-governmental organizations and community-based organizations to reach out to rural populations who may have less access to formal education or media literacy. These interventions typically include community research work done in advance, improvisational scripts grounded on local facts and post performance debrief. These processes correspond to participatory models of development communication previous models that focus on dialogue, rather than imposition (Servaes 75).

Besides, applied theatre creates a collective reflection. The issue of public health is not often a personal issue, but it is rooted in the social order of things, in the unequal distribution of wealth, and the culture surrounding a community. Using dramatization, communities can not only look at the behaviour of the individuals, but also at the structural conditions that perpetuate poor health outcomes. The theatre therefore becomes a means of learning as well as a social commentator.

Development Communication

Development communication is an area of research and practice that incorporates the processes of communication in social and economic development projects. It came into the limelight in the middle of the twentieth century in conjunction with the modernization theories, which presupposed that underdeveloped societies would be able to develop in case they followed the Western patterns of development by spreading the information. The early development communication practices were based on mass media campaigns that were aimed at the transmission of expert knowledge to passive audiences. Nonetheless, this top-down approach was soon criticized because of the neglect of local knowledge systems, cultural contexts and community agency.

Theorists like Jan Servaes believe that development is something that cannot be externally imposed but rather it should be participatory, dialogic and rooted in culture (Servaes 75). Participatory development communication thus changes the emphasis on passing information to mass involvement. It does not see communities as the beneficiaries of development but instead, they are viewed as active participants of their own change. Communication in this paradigm is not a weapon to be used in persuasion but a negotiating, reflecting and empowering process.

Development communication is relevant to the field of public health because it focuses on sustainability. Unless communities are engaged in dialogue during health campaigns, the success of such campaigns in imparting the desired changes in behaviour may be short-lived. Unless communities view health interventions as culturally acceptable or indigenized, they might be opposed. By comparison, participatory styles invite communities to review their practices, beliefs, and issues against health concerns.

Theatre has a strong association with participatory development communication due to the dialogic nature of the latter. Theatre gets feedback unlike radio broadcasts or pamphlets. The audience tends to react verbally, emotionally and physically at times to whatever they observe in the stage. This communication makes the process of communication a two-way process. In most Theatre for Development projects in Nigeria, consultations within the community are carried out before performances and discussions are held after the performances. Such discussions help health professionals to dispel misconceptions as well as gain an understanding of the local viewpoints.

Behaviour Change Communication

Behaviour Change Communication is strategic process that aims to transform attitudes, perceptions and practices with the intended results of improving health outcomes. As opposed to information dissemination that is the main concern of awareness campaigns, behaviour change communication aims at long-term modification of individual and group behaviour. It acknowledges that knowledge does not necessarily result in behavioural change, but a change takes place through a conglomeration of understanding, attachment to emotion, social support, and sense of self-efficacy.

Scholars of health communication believe that people would embrace emerging behaviours more when they see relatable models showing both negative effects of bad habits and the positive rewards of good behaviours. The social learning theory can contribute to this view by postulating that individuals learn by observing and imitating those around them in the social context. Theatre realizes this process. Whenever the audiences' watch characters face the health dilemma, like refusing to take a vaccine, have unsafe sex, or do not adhere to the sanitation, they see the dramatized consequences that encourage thought and analysis.

Narrative persuasion theory goes further to explain that viewers who are engulfed by interesting stories will be less opposed to persuasive messages since viewers can identify with characters on the same level (Green and Brock 701). Theatre achieves this immersion by establishing this through live embodiment, dialogue and shared experience. As the viewers relate to the characters portraying the healthier behaviours, they are highly likely to rethink their own behaviours.

Behaviour change communication is more effective in the participatory format. The audience members who interfere with performance or engage in post performance discussions are symbolically rehearsing new behaviours. According to Boal, theatre is a practice of real life action (Boal 141). This rehearsal reinforces confidence and social support of behavioural change in the context of the public health.

Change communication in behaviour thus offers the psychological basis of comprehending the reason as to why theatre is not just informative but transformative. Theatre makes internalization of the health messages achievable and enhances the chances of maintaining behavioural change through modeling, emotional involvement, and collective contemplation.

Application of Theatre in Communicating Public Health Messages in Nigeria and Africa

Theatre has been a significant tool of communicating with the public on health matters or issues in Nigeria and in Africa. It is a form of communication that is dynamic in terms of educating, engaging and influencing communities. What makes it effective is that it allows merging entertainment with education and makes health messages more relatable and memorable particularly in low literacy areas and where formal health education is only accessible to a limited number of people (Adelekan et al. 45). Through its dramatization of real life situations and those that are familiar in a particular culture, the theatre offers practical knowledge and at the same time touches the hearts of the viewers and societal expectations. With this participatory quality of theatre, knowledge can be transferred in a way that is interventional, context-dependent, and able to lead to a behavioral change (IHO 12).

One of the best-documented uses of theatre in the field of public health is the use of theatre in HIV/AIDS awareness programs. In Nigeria, theatre troupes have joined forces with non-governmental organizations and the government agencies to produce community plays on the spread of HIV, HIV prevention, and reduction of stigma (WHO 27). Such performances are usually staged in market places, in schools and community centers where they draw huge crowds by using known storytelling styles and humour. Theatre brings complex medical information closer to people and eliminates any fear of openly discussing HIV through the use of local languages, music and dance (UNAIDS 33). As an example, participatory theatre performances such as *Vikela* by Amakhosi Theatre depict the realities of HIV testing among young couples, thereby modeling responsible behaviour and encouraging voluntary counseling and testing, while initiatives like Theatre for Development projects by Jana Sanskriti and community-based forum theatre interventions by Soul City Institute have similarly engaged audiences in addressing HIV prevention, stigma, and behavioural change through culturally relevant performances (Chinyowa, 49).

Another important field where theatre has been put to use successfully is in the prevention of malaria. Theatre is applied in several malaria-prone areas to enlighten the communities on the importance of using insecticide treated mosquito nets, eradicating stagnant water, and seeking early medical attention to such conditions like fever and chills (Adelekan et al. 50). The interventions with the help of street theatre and role-play will enable performers to present the life cycle of the malaria mosquito, dramatize the consequences of negligence, and teach preventive measures, as demonstrated in community-based malaria awareness campaigns such as the Communication for Change (C-Change) programme implemented by Johns Hopkins Center for Communication Programs, which used participatory drama to educate rural populations on mosquito control and prevention strategies. Through the use of humor, suspense, and characters that relate to the audience, such performances guarantee that the audience does not just learn preventive measures but also recollects the same way out of the performance hall. Such activities have been particularly successful in rural areas of Nigeria, where conventional media such as radio and print are often less effective in reaching local populations, and where community participation plays a crucial role in sustaining behavioural change (IPCC, 22).

Maternal and child health campaigns have also been very crucial through theatre. Interactive theatre has been applied in Northern Nigeria and other areas that have registered high maternal mortality rates to overcome cultural and social obstacles that may hinder the use of antenatal services by the expecting women (IPCC 23). The shows tend to present situations in which women and their families experience the challenges of pregnancy, childbirth, and infant care, while highlighting the benefits of quality medical care, proper nutrition, and timely postnatal services, as illustrated in *Mother, I Will Not Die* by Ahmadu Bello University Theatre for Development troupe, which was used to promote safe motherhood and maternal health practices in rural Nigerian communities. Theatrical performances promote desirable health habits by sensitizing families about the repercussions of ignoring or adverse traditional practices. For example, a play can demonstrate the situation when a family does not accept hospital care of a pregnant mother and, consequently, suffers complications, and the community begins to think about other safe options.

Such dramatizations can also educate and provoke dialogue and thoughts on the part of the community and support the message of public health (Adelekan, 52).

The use of theatre, especially to combat vaccine hesitancy and misinformation, has also been used in vaccination campaigns, especially polio eradication. Community-based theatre has been applied in Nigeria to deliver the message about vaccination of polio and discuss why vaccines are safe and why rumours about immunization are discouraged (IHO 18). Respected members of the community or dramatization of local issues around vaccination are common aspects of performance, which increases the credibility and acceptance. Coupled with polio, theatre has been employed in raising awareness of regular childhood immunization, with a particular focus on the positive effects of immunization in diseases such as measles and tuberculosis (WHO 29). Theatre can be used to instill the messages about vaccination in communities through humor, music, and culturally significant storytelling to decrease the fear and suspicion.

COVID-19 of recent has demonstrated that theatre can be used in communicating its role in health to people by continuing to be relevant and adaptable. In Nigeria and other African countries, theatre performances were adapted to outdoor venues, socially distanced formats, and in some cases digital platforms in order to communicate essential public health messages such as mask wearing, hand hygiene, social distancing, and vaccination (Chinoyowa,53). Through dramaticizing situations that portray the local experience, the performers demonstrated the danger of non-adherence and the advantages of preventive actions. The flexibility of theatre was able to reach a wide range of people such as in urban and rural areas and also overcome the flow of misinformation about the virus and vaccination. As an example, this approach is reflected in Theatre for Development health outreach programmes implemented by Ahmadu Bello University, where performances depict families ignoring public health advice and subsequently experiencing illness, before community dialogue and reflection reinforce behavioural change and collective responsibility through participatory storytelling.

Still, in general, theatre has proven that it is able not only to educate communities about the danger of health but it can also reach them emotionally and socially in a manner that is unattainable through the traditional media. Theatre contributes to sustainable behavior change, a sense of trust in the community, and strong interventions in the field of Public Health by means of dialogue, reflection, and participation (UNAIDS 36).

Effectiveness and Impact of Theatre Messages on Public Health

The contribution of theatre to public health communication in Nigeria and Africa has always proven to have been more than just an awareness creation tool extending to quantifiable behavioral adjustments and social norm shifts. It is non-authoritative and culturally integrated, which enables the audience to think and feel about health messages, thus, it is especially effective in the situations when the level of literacy is low and the traditional mass media is inaccessible to some groups (Adelekan et al. 56). Theatre, however, is very strong as it makes abstract medical ideas playable, so communities would realize and think about what can be done to resolve burning health problems.

Theatre interventions in the context of the awareness on HIV/AIDS have demonstrated important effects on knowledge, attitudes, and practices. As an illustration, community theatre performance in the states of Lagos and Kano was performed in partnership with NGOs and health organizations whereby scenarios were presented on safe sexual practices, voluntary counseling and testing, and stigma reduction. Not only did the audience members report that they had greater knowledge about the ways HIV is transmitted, but they also said they were more willing to talk about HIV and obtain testing services (UNAIDS 36). Other similar projects in Southern Africa like Kenya and Zambia have demonstrated how theatre can be used to reach the high-risk groups like youth and marginalized groups using localized stories that are culturally and socially relevant. Notably, such interventions are not merely passing on information but will be modeling the positive behaviors, and as such, the audiences will be able to see the implications of not following the risky behaviors and the positive results of protective behaviors.

Theatrical involvement has also helped in the prevention of malaria. Performances in rural Nigerian communities tend to act out the life cycle of the female anopheles mosquito, the hazards of stagnant water, and how to use the insecticides treated nets. With the use of humour, relatable characters, and suspenseful narration, these performances enhance audience recall of key health messages and encourage the adoption of preventive measures through engaging and emotionally engaging storytelling. In communities involved in the interventions of the theatres, follow up assessment has recorded increased use of nets and environmental sanitation practices than the control communities who only used radio or print campaigns. Street theatre, especially, has been successful to access scattered rural populations, to involve bystanders in the public areas as well as to engage the community in discussing health practices.

Theatre has been found to overcome intricate socio-cultural boundaries in maternal and child health campaigns. In Northern Nigeria where the maternal mortality rate is still high, the theatre performance has been directed at not only pregnant women but also husbands, family elders and community leaders who impact on the health seeking behaviors. Drama stories that show complexities in child-delivery to lack of antenatal care, hostility to hospital delivery, or dangerous customs have made the audience reflect on matters and in some instances the community has taken the initiative and organized programs to support maternal health facility. The critique of these programs shows that theatre may be effective to improve clinic attendance, promote skilled birth attendance, and gain more familial engagement in maternal and neonatal care (IPCC 23). Through dramatizing the personal and structural outcomes, theatre helps audiences to investigate the social determinants of health and mobilize solutions.

Another clear example of the effectiveness of theatre is its use in vaccination campaigns, particularly in the promotion of polio eradication efforts. Theatres plays have also been used in areas that have traditionally opposed vaccination to counter the misinformation and create trust between the society and the health departments. In Northern Nigeria, for example, plays featuring respected community members that dramatized issues surrounding vaccine uptake and highlighted the health benefits of immunization contributed to increased participation in polio vaccination campaigns (IHO, 18). Theatre enabled audiences to engage with the subject matter emotionally and socially, helping to address fears and misconceptions within a safe and familiar community setting. In addition to polio, applied theatre has been utilized in enhancing awareness on routine

childhood immunization, the importance of early vaccination of diseases like measles, tuberculosis and hepatitis and the role of caregivers in protecting the health of children.

The flexibility and relevance of theatre were further seen during the COVID-19 pandemic. Pieces were adapted to outdoor and socially distanced and online platforms, which increased the coverage of both urban and rural audiences (Adelekan et al. 53). The theatre was designed to correspond to such important questions as wearing masks, hand hygiene, social distancing, and vaccine acceptance and dispel misinformation transmitted in social networks and informal groups. Indicatively, plays that depicted how families were neglecting the preventive care and becoming very sick generated some reflection and discussion, which led to audiences internalizing the advised behaviors. Theatre was also able to create solutions jointly since the members of the community proposed problem-solutions that were relevant in the context, which showed that theatre could be utilized not only in the communication process but also in the process of generating solutions.

Difficulties and Constrictions of Utilizing Theatre in Health Education

Although theatre-based public health interventions have proven to be effective, there are a number of challenges that prevent the use of such interventions in Nigeria and Africa, limiting its reach and effectiveness. Funding and resource shortage is one of the biggest challenges. Most theatre projects are dependent on short term project-based funding sourced by the NGOs or government agencies which may not be long term to support long-term programming. The budget constraints may impact the quality and quantity of production, hire educated and talented performers as well as the number of performances required to support health messages. It can consequently lead to the situation where certain communities are only exposed to vital health information occasionally, which can lower the chances of having a lasting behavior change.

Another important challenge is logistical constraints. The staging of theatre in remote or rural locations entails the transport of personnel, props and technical equipment to the remote location, which in most cases involves a challenging terrain. Environmental conditions may cause disruption of performances like weather, community activities or rival social engagements and reduce the audience interaction. Moreover, urban schools may be problematic with regards to finding the venues and providing high attendance with safety.

There are also cultural and social dynamics, which represent significant constraints. The messages about health expressed in theatre should overcome highly embedded beliefs, taboos, and the customs. In other instances, they become resistant when theatre content goes against the local standards or authority. As an example, maternal health campaigns are likely to be faced by family elders or husbands who are the decision-makers. Likewise, the introduction of the vaccination campaigns can be met with resistance by the communities that have a history of distrust towards the government functioning. Lack of sufficient adjustments of performances to local settings may compromise understanding as well as reception.

Conclusion

Theatre has also been shown to be a multi-purpose and highly effective medium for conveying public health messages to the Nigerian public and indeed across Africa. It functions as an important

bridge between biomedical knowledge and community understanding by translating complex medical and scientific information into culturally familiar narratives that people can easily relate to. Through the use of storytelling, dramatic performance, humour, symbolism, music, dance, and direct audience participation, theatre makes health communication more engaging, accessible, and memorable. This process enhances cultural relevance, encourages emotional and intellectual engagement, and strengthens narrative persuasion, which together contribute significantly to improved awareness, knowledge retention, and sustained behavioural change in health-related practices.

The application of theatre in public health campaigns is evident in several critical areas, including HIV/AIDS awareness, malaria prevention, maternal and child health education, vaccination campaigns such as polio eradication, and more recently COVID-19 prevention and control efforts. In these contexts, theatre is used not only as a tool for information dissemination but also as a mechanism for behavioural influence and social transformation. By dramatizing real-life situations such as vaccine hesitancy, poor hygiene practices, unsafe maternal behaviours, stigma surrounding diseases, and misconceptions about health interventions, theatre creates emotional resonance that allows audiences to reflect on their own experiences. This reflective process often leads to attitude change and encourages individuals to adopt healthier practices. Unlike conventional mass media, theatre enables two-way communication, especially in participatory forms such as Theatre for Development and forum theatre, where audiences are not passive recipients but active contributors to the meaning-making process.

Furthermore, theatre has proven particularly valuable in rural and marginalized communities where literacy levels may be low and access to formal health communication channels is limited. In such environments, street theatre and community-based performances provide an inclusive platform where information can be shared in local languages and within familiar cultural settings. These performances also create opportunities for dialogue, allowing community members to ask questions, challenge misconceptions, and collectively explore practical solutions to their health challenges. This participatory dimension strengthens trust between health communicators and communities, reduces misinformation, and enhances collective responsibility for health outcomes. In addition, the use of relatable characters drawn from everyday life ensures that audiences see their realities reflected on stage, which increases identification with the message and strengthens behavioural impact.

In conclusion, theatre should not be regarded merely as a secondary artistic or entertainment activity, but rather as a vital and strategic approach within participatory, culturally grounded, and sustainable health communication frameworks. Its strength lies in its ability to combine education, entertainment, and participation in a single communicative process that speaks directly to both emotion and reason. With adequate institutional support from government and health agencies, stronger collaboration between theatre practitioners and public health professionals, and deliberate integration into national development communication policies, theatre has the potential to remain a significant and sustainable tool for improving health literacy, influencing behavioural patterns, and promoting collective responsibility toward health outcomes in Nigeria and across the African continent.

Recommendations

A number of strategic steps are suggested to ensure the theatre is used to its maximum capacity in encouraging public health messages. First, there is the necessity of institutional cooperation among the theatre practitioners, the representatives of the public health system, and the policy makers. Through official incorporation of theatre into health programs, it is possible to standardize and fund performances, and coordinate them with the overall strategies of promoting the health of the population. This cooperation may also support the development of community-based performers so that interventions are culturally competent and sensitive to community needs.

Second, community governance and capacity building needs to be prioritized. The local performers, health volunteers and community leaders can be trained to be able to provide theatrical interventions on their own which makes it more sustainable and less dependent on external facilitators. Societies that have the capacity to produce and modify performances are in a better place to cope with the changing health issues, including routine vaccinations and outbreak diseases.

Lastly, it should be culturally adaptive and participatory in design. Content on performance ought to be based on local realities, indigenous languages and norms ought to be observed within the community but negative practices ought to be challenged. Engagement of the audience, feedback, and inclusive scripting procedures make sure that the interventions are relevant and empowering.

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