



## Chapter 10

# A Comparative Review of Health Communication Research in West Africa and Other Sub-Saharan African Countries (2018–2022)

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### Abstract

Health communication is a recent field of study, yet it is one of the most rapidly growing and developing subdisciplines within the field of communication. Research about health communication is instrumental in terms of bridging the gap between scientists and practitioners as well as informing health promotion and predicting behavioural and other outcomes. A qualitative approach was employed, to conduct a meta-analysis of four major international health journals over a five-year period focusing on health topics, research methodology, and the theories used in sub-Saharan countries. In total, 125 articles were reviewed. The results indicate that few articles on these subjects were published in sub-Saharan countries over the five-year period. Furthermore, there was a greater concentration of research in some countries than in others. These results are important in terms of informing researchers about countries that have a deficit of research as well as the areas of research that are lacking.

### Introduction

Communication is a core part of health delivery, and governments all over the world continue to develop campaigns and messages aimed at drawing citizen's attention to the importance of maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Recognising its importance

in healthcare, the World Health Organization (WHO) came up with a strategic communications framework for effective communication, with a goal 'to provide information, advice and guidance to decision-makers (key audiences) to prompt action that will protect the health of individuals, families, communities and nations' (WHO, 2023). This strategy is key to WHO's mission of promoting health, keeping the world safe and serving the vulnerable. In addition, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 3 (Good health and well-being) (UN, 2023) aims to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all. One of the main goals of public health communication is to promote risk-reduction behaviour through health messaging that shapes the public's attitudes and perception of risk (Nan & Thompson, 2020). Public health communication in the sense that it is understood today has required contemporaneous advancement and innovations in the allied disciplines of public health and social sciences as well as in the communication industries (Salmon & Poorisat, 2020).

Health communication is one of the most rapidly growing and developing subdisciplines within the field of communication (Thompson, 2014) – one of the most vibrant, complex and significant areas of research and practice in contemporary society (Harrington, 2015) - and researchers often work across health issues to engage in research that bridges the distance between bench scientists and practitioners (Silk et.al., 2020). It refers to using communication theory, evidence, techniques, and creativity to inform, educate and influence public views and perceptions, and promote behaviours and practices that advance the health and well-being of individuals and communities (Olaoye & Onyenakeya, 2023). Contemporary research on health communication has been marked by the presence of big data and computational social science (CSS) techniques (Rains, 2020), while socio-economic challenges, communicative barriers, and the lack of health infrastructure constitute and reinforce obstacles to health for all, especially for those who live in the underserved spaces of the Global South (Dutta, 2020).

This chapter explores articles published in two health communication journals and two public health journals from

international publishing outfits, over a period of five years (2018 to 2022). The five-year timeframe was purposely chosen to cover the pre- and post-Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) era in a bid to identify health communication research conducted in sub-Saharan Africa, the nature of collaboration between scholars, theories and method(s) prevalent in the study area. The chapter attempts to critique research in sub-Saharan Africa with a special focus on the West African context.

## Literature Review

### Advent of Health Communication

Some researchers trace back the origins of the study of health communication to the work performed by paediatrician Barbara Korsch and her colleagues in the late 1960s (Thompson et al., 2014). They assessed provider-patient interaction and suggested that the field of health communication might offer a distinct arena for consideration. Consequently, Harrington (2015) submits that health communication officially became a subdiscipline of communication in 1975 at the annual convention of the International Communication Association (ICA). Limage et al. (2014) recount that in the 1980s, the strongest health communication programme in sub-Saharan Africa was focused on routine immunisation, child survival and family planning. Furthermore, in 1986, Lawrence Eribaum publishers produced a journal called *Health Communication*, with early submissions focused almost exclusively on the interpersonal aspects of provider-patient interaction, while subsequent submissions quickly expanded to include health campaign issues (Thompson, 2014). Then, in 1996, a second journal focused on health communication, *The Journal of Health Communication*, was started, and this journal began with more of a social marketing and international focus. Both journals have continued to flourish. Today, there are many journals on public health and other aspects of health that publish health communication-related studies all over the world.

Health communication is central to campaigns that convey health information to communities and facilitate health education and health promotion. It is also central to community participation, empowerment and the building of partnerships grounded in trust and mutual understanding (Olufowote, 2014). In recent decades, gaps in health equity between countries and amongst social groups within countries have widened, irrespective of the progress recorded in medicine and technology (WHO, 2021). The prevalence of health-related calamities, high infant mortality, below-average life expectancy, and the effectiveness of various health communication strategies and/or campaigns are largely understudied in Africa (Fletcher, 2014). With over 890 million inhabitants in 54 countries, the African region accounts for about 12% of the world's population (WHO, 2022). Sub-Saharan Africa has approximately 10% of the world's population, but bears 25% of the world's disease burden, within a context of increased poverty, food insecurity, indebtedness, poor economic performance, gender inequality, gender-based violence, conflicts, natural disasters, ignorance, fear, stigma and discrimination (Limage et al., 2014). Researchers and public health professionals have long realised that the only long-term solution to the region's deadly diseases requires interventions at multiple levels, including changing people's social and physical environments, providing access to care and treatment and ultimately changing people's behaviours (Limage et al., 2014). However, recent studies have shown that during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, under-five years of age mortality fell by 35%, neonatal death dropped by 21% and maternal mortality declined by 28% (WHO Africa, 2022), thus supporting Olaoye and Onyenakeya's (2023) observation that health communication in sub-Saharan Africa has proved essential in providing meaningful information and cultivating attitudinal and behavioural change amongst people regarding personal and public health issues.

Like other continents, Africa is grappling with many health-related issues such as COVID-19, Lassa fever, malaria, and HIV/AIDS, and, understandably, communication scholars have conducted several studies in a bid to investigate the effects of health-related campaigns and messages related to these diseases

on the public's attitude to their health, and its implications for policy decisions in Africa.

## **Nature of Health Communication Scholarship**

Health communication is a multifaceted field of research, theory and practice concerned with delivering health-related information to diverse populations (McCulloch et al., 2021). The field is evolving in response to the need to address significant healthcare and policy problems (Hoffman-Longtin et al., 2020). It is uniquely positioned as an effective approach to lowering morbidity and mortality within the region, as it lends itself to be grounded in the socioecological context, including enabling environments, service delivery systems, communities and household dynamics which influences individual behaviour (Limage, et.al., 2014). As scholars whose backgrounds were in other areas of the field saw the potential application of their work in, for instance, persuasion or mass communication, they began to turn their focus to the healthcare context as well (Thompson, 2014).

Multidisciplinarity draws on knowledge from different disciplines but stays within the boundaries of the home disciplines (Choi & Pak, 2006). It involves researchers from multiple disciplines that independently investigate the communication dimension of a health problem (Harrington, 2015). The fundamental focus of multidisciplinary work in the field of health communication is investigating a common health problem by applying concepts from different disciplines to the problem (Cohen, 2022). In an interdisciplinary approach, on the other hand, scholars jointly address a common health problem. It analyses, synthesises and harmonises links between disciplines into a coordinated and coherent whole (Choi & Pak, 2006) as well as connects scholars from different fields who use different approaches to gather data and build evidence-based practice (Cohen, 2022). Scholarship in the field of health communication is broad, with interdisciplinary contributions from researchers trained in a variety of fields, including communication, nursing, medicine, pharmacy, public health and social work (Hoffman-Longtin et al., 2020). It involves researchers from multiple disciplines who collaborate to investigate the multiple dimensions

of either a health problem in general or the communication aspect of a health problem (Harrington, 2015). It is important as it creates room for different people to focus exclusively on different aspects of the same problem.

Transdisciplinarity integrates the natural, social and health sciences in a humanities context, and transcends their traditional boundaries (Choi & Pak, 2006). It is research that spans disciplinary boundaries to create new theories and methods that integrate knowledge from multiple disciplines to address complex social problems (Harrington, 2015). This translational activity is essential to increase the likelihood that emerging science from the laboratory makes it into the hands of health professionals who can integrate it into their everyday practice with patients (Silk et al., 2020) and the promotion of health and well-being (Harrington, 2015). However, Cohen (2022) concludes that evidence of truly transdisciplinary approaches and outcomes from health communication scholarship is rarer in the field.

As health communication scholars continue their work, our knowledge will be enriched through these forms of research, as an integration of theory and practice takes place within the context of multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary content, epistemologies and practices (Cohen, 2022).

## Methodology

This chapter used a qualitative approach to review four major international health journals (*Journal of Health Communication*, *Health Communication*, *BMC Public Health* and *PLOS Global Public Health*). Journal articles published from 2018 to 2022 were critically reviewed to ascertain health topics, research methodology, theories used and countries. The *Journal of Health Communication* and *Health Communication* are the most prominent journals dedicated to health communication scholarship, thus offering a representation of current trends in health communication research (McCulloch, et.al., 2021; Thompson, 2014). Also, *BMC Public Health* and *PLOS Global Public Health* are leading journals in public health. Articles for this study were assessed on the journals' websites. The study spanned five years

(2018 to 2022), covering the period before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The research method used was content analysis as articles in the chosen journals that fell within the timeframe were analysed.

The keyword 'Africa' was used to search for articles in the two health communication journals while the keywords 'health communication', 'health messages', and 'health campaigns' were used to search for publications in the two public health journals. For *Health Communication*, the search yielded 398 articles, while the *Journal of Health Communication* had 184 articles within the study period. However, articles on African Americans, black / African Americans, black communities and other parts of Africa were excluded. *BMC Public Health* yielded 1,670 results, while *PLOS Global Public Health* had 1,023 articles. Articles that were not within the study period and concentrated on other parts of Africa were eliminated. Only articles on sub-Saharan Africa were analysed to ascertain the prominent health communication topics in the region, the contribution of research about West Africa and other parts of sub-Saharan Africa, the interdisciplinary nature of publications across the regions and the theories and research methodologies employed. Authors' affiliation was categorised into three: medical (nursing, pharmacy, medicine and other related fields), communication scholars (media studies, mass communication, journalism and other communication related fields) and interdisciplinary (a combination of medical, communication-related fields and the social sciences). Research methodologies was classified under quantitative (surveys, experiments, quantitative content analysis and quasi-experiments); qualitative (in-depth interviews, FGDs (focus group discussions), qualitative content analysis and ethnography); mixed methods (more than one research method used); and reviews (systematic reviews, meta-analysis and other types of reviews).

## Results and discussion

A total of 125 articles on health communication was found from the four journals and analysed. The *Journal of Health Communication* and *Health Communication* each published nine

articles for the five years under review. Of the nine articles, five from *Journal of Health Communication* and five articles from *Health Communication* were published on countries in West Africa - see Table 1.

However, the two public health journals (*BMC Public Health* and *PLOS Global Public Health*) had more articles that addressed health-related issues in the region. The total number of publications in these journals is 107 (*BMC Public Health* [n=79]; *PLOS Global Public Health* [n=28]).

This result is consistent with the studies by Nazione et al. (2013) and McCulloch et al., (2021) on these two health communication journals. For Nazione et al. (2013), Africa, including Madagascar, was the subject in only 8 (2.3%) publications from *Health Communication* and 18 (5.4%) in *Journal of Health Communication* for a period of ten years (2000 to 2009). Similarly, the study of the two journals by McCulloch et al. (2021) found that out of 2,050 articles published in the two journals over a period of ten years, Africa was the focus in only 22 articles in the *Journal of Health Communication*, and in 15 articles in *Health Communication*.

The use of theory for health communication research in the sampled journals was minimal. Only ten out of 125 articles made use of theory. Using content analysis, McCulloch et al. (2021) found that health communication research often lacks a theoretical underpinning. This can be linked to the authors' affiliations, as most studies in the two public health journals are written by those in the medical field, and, accordingly, do not have any theoretical underpinning.

Furthermore, the most common research methodology was quantitative (n=71), followed by qualitative (n=38), mixed methods (n=8) and reviews (n=8); while the sampled publications covered a wide range of health-related topics like polio, COVID-19, hypertension, diabetes, HIV/AIDS, cholera, family planning, sexual and reproductive health, malaria, vaccines, Lassa fever, Ebola, and so on.

**Table 1:** Results from the journals sampled

<b>Journal(s)</b>	<b>Number of articles</b>	<b>Author(s) affiliation</b>	<b>Theory</b>	<b>Research Methodologies</b>
<i>Journal of Health Communication</i>	Nine articles (West Africa, n=5; other parts of sub-Saharan Africa, n=4)	Interdisciplinary (3); medical (4); communication scholars (2)	Protection motivation theory; extended parallel processing model and framing theory; diffusion of innovation and integrated model of behaviour; health literacy skill framework	Quantitative (7); qualitative (2)
<i>Health Communication</i>	Nine articles (West Africa, n=5; other parts of sub-Saharan Africa, n=4)	Communication scholars (7); interdisciplinary (2)	Hybrid sociolinguistic approach (1); culture-centred approach (1); Advertising Research Foundation's hierarchy of effects model (1); framing theory (1)	Quantitative (3); qualitative (3); mixed methods (1); review (2)
<i>BMC Public Health</i>	79 articles (West Africa, n=27; other parts of sub-Saharan Africa, n=52)	Interdisciplinary (32); medical (46); communication scholars (1)	Diffusion of innovations (1); social network theory (1); theory of triadic influence (1)	Review (4); quantitative (44); qualitative (25); mixed method (5)
<i>PLoS Global Public Health</i>	28 articles (West Africa, n=4; other parts of sub-Saharan Africa, n=24)	Medical (12); interdisciplinary (16)	Agenda-setting theory	Qualitative (8); quantitative (17); mixed methods (2); review (2)

### **Health communication research in West Africa**

Table 2 shows the subject matter that dominates research in West Africa, the countries of focus for this research, health topics, author(s) affiliation, theories and research methodologies. It is discouraging to note that health communication research in West Africa is not thriving, with most of it focused on Nigeria, the region's most populous country. For the five-year period under review, only five articles from *Health Communication* and five articles from the *Journal of Health Communication* were on the West African region. For these two important journals dedicated solely to health communication, the topics treated were polio, HIV/AIDS, malaria, sexual and reproductive health and family planning. Nigeria is one of four countries that is still grappling with the polio virus, with challenges encountered mainly in the north (Olufowote, 2014), and the study on polio in Nigeria was centred on the northern part of the country. Studies on the issue of the recent COVID-19 pandemic and the myths and misinformation surrounding COVID-19 vaccines were absent in studies on West Africa in the journals sampled.

There are several media campaigns and messages on COVID-19 by governments in the region, geared towards sensitising the people to the dangers of the virus and the importance of taking the COVID-19 vaccine. According to Olufowote (2014), the health challenges and issues that Nigeria faces include the eradication of polio, infant and maternal health, HIV/AIDS, and media research ethics. Similarly, Senegal fits the health profile of many developing countries, but the nation has gained prominence for its HIV/AIDS prevention success (Ndiaye & Diouf, 2014).

While there was a low number of publications in the two journals of communication, the other two public health journals (*BMC Public Health* and *PLOS Global Public Health*) had the most publications on health communication in Africa. They published articles from the region on polio, malaria, tuberculosis, sexual and reproductive health, and family planning, amongst other topics. McCulloch et al. (2021) came to the same conclusion: health communication scholars study a broad and varied range of topics,

**Table 2:** Health Communication Research in West Africa as represented in the sampled journals

Journal(s)	Country	Health communication topics	Author(s) affiliation	Theory	Research Methodologies
<i>Journal of Health Communication</i>	Nigeria (1); Niger (1); Senegal (1); West Africa (involves countries in West Africa) (2)	Malaria (2), sexual & reproductive health (1), family planning (2)	Interdisciplinary (3); medical (2)	Diffusion of innovations & integrated model of behaviour (1); health literacy skill framework (1); communication infrastructure and discrete emotions theories	Quantitative (3); qualitative (2)
<i>Health Communication</i>	Nigeria (2); Liberia (2); Ghana (1)	Polio (1); HIV/AIDS (1); peacebuilding (2); opioid crisis (1)	Communication scholars (4); interdisciplinary (1)	Culture-centred approach (1); Advertising Research Foundation's hierarchy of effects model (1); framing theory (1)	Quantitative (2); qualitative (1); review (2)

Journal(s)	Country	Health communication topics	Author(s) affiliation	Theory	Research Methodologies
<i>BMC Public Health</i>	Ghana (7); Nigeria (12); Cameroon (2); Benin (2); Burkina Faso (1); Senegal (2)	Adverse drug reaction (1); improved donor relations (1); polio (3); malaria (4); tuberculosis (1); livelihood empowerment (1); anti-smoking (1); health information-seeking behaviour (1); suicide (1); consumption of energy drinks (1); Lassa fever (1); smoking/tobacco (1); disease surveillance and response (1); maternal and neonatal immunisation uptake (1); helmet use (1); immunisation (1); epidemic management (1); sexual and reproductive health (1); tobacco (1); hypertension and diabetes (1); family planning (1); cholera vaccination (1)	Interdisciplinary (8); medical (17); communication scholars (1)	Social network theory (1); theory of triadic influence (1)	Review (1); quantitative (16); qualitative (8); mixed methods (2)
<i>PLoS Global Public Health</i>	Nigeria (1); Ghana (1); Senegal (1); Sierra Leone (1)	Eye health (1); abortion (1); Ebola (1); family planning (1)	Medical (2); interdisciplinary (2)	Agenda-setting theory	Qualitative (2); quantitative (1); mixed methods (1)

thus affording researchers the ability to better address health-related issues that may otherwise be overlooked.

Health campaign research is a very important area of the field of health communication, especially amongst those scholars with a background in communication or public health (Thompson et al., 2014). From the sampled journals, several articles dealt with health campaigns and their influence – for example: “Extending communication campaign from health to peacebuilding: A locally driven communication campaign approach as part of a peacebuilding initiative in Liberia”. Fittingly, the authors were all from the communication discipline, except one who was from marketing. However, *BMC Public Health* had more medical personnel publish health communication articles than communication scholars. Most articles by communication scholars appeared in *Health Communication*, with just one in *BMC Public Health*. The interdisciplinary nature of health communication was evident in scholars from different disciplines publishing articles on health communication messages, campaigns, and behavioural studies.

Furthermore, Thompson et al. (2014) concluded that in recent years two new foci have become pervasive in health communication research: health content in the media and the role of technology in health communication. Publications from West Africa in the sampled journals showed that research in the region, though minimal, is keeping up with the current research trends in the field. Several methodologies have been employed in studying health communication, and these were evident in the publications found in the sampled journals. The research methods used by these authors were:

1. Exploration and descriptive: A number of studies from the region made use of in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, case study, survey and ethnography.
2. Examining interpersonal exchanges and messages: Some studies also made use of content analysis, narrative analysis and social network analysis.
3. Causal explication: A number of were experimental studies.

4. Cultural, population and critical concerns: These include a historical study and some systematic and scoping reviews on particular health communication issues.
5. Mixed methods research was also employed.

### **Health communication research in other parts of sub-Saharan Africa**

Table 3 shows publications on other regions of Africa, highlighting the country most in focus, health topics, authors' affiliation, theories as well as research methodologies. The countries most studied were South Africa and Uganda. As seen from articles published in West Africa, only nine articles (*Health Communication*, n=5; *Journal of Health Communication*, n=4) dealt in issues pertaining to Africa. The most researched topics were HIV/AIDS and COVID-19 vaccines. However, overall, publications about Africa in the two health communication journals were few in number. This can be attributed to the fact that both journals (*Health Communication* and *Journal of Health Communication*) have low acceptance rates, high numbers of submissions, and high impact ratings, which are indicators of the high quality of research published in them (Thompson, 2014).

Sub-Saharan Africa carries the highest burden of HIV/AIDS-related mortality in the world (Limage et al., 2014). Other health areas of concern are family planning, malaria, Ebola, Lassa fever, and, more recently, COVID-19. Furthermore, a strong constituency around maternal mortality, the advent of the global fund, and the push for polio eradication provided some balance, with increased support and resources emerging for health communication in the areas of safe motherhood, malaria, tuberculosis and polio (Limage et al., 2014). South Africa enjoys greater access to advanced overall healthcare than any country in the southern part of Africa, but this access is disproportionately distributed to members of the wealthiest upper class (Gerdes & Basu, 2014). Uganda was reported to have had one of the best healthcare systems in Africa during the 1960s but civil unrest following a military coup led to economic declines in the 1970s and 1980s that adversely affected the once primarily government-funded healthcare system (Wilkin, 2014). Countries with the

**Table 3:** Health communication research in other regions of Africa as shown in the sampled journals

Journal(s)	Country	Health communication topics	Author(s) affiliation	Theory	Research Methodologies
<i>Journal of Health Communication</i>	South Africa (1); Country level analysis (1); Kenya (2);	HIV/AIDS (2); COVID-19 vaccines (2)	Interdisciplinary (1); medical (2); communication scholars (1)	Protection motivation theory (1); extended parallel processing model	Quantitative (3); qualitative (1)
<i>Health Communication</i>	Uganda (2); South Africa (1); Mozambique (1)	Maternal health (1); mental illness (1); intercultural health interactions (1); entertainment education radio programme (1)	Communication scholars (3); interdisciplinary (1)	Hybrid sociolinguistic approach (1)	Quantitative (1); qualitative (2); mixed methods (1)

Journal(s)	Country	Health communication topics	Author(s) affiliation	Theory	Research Methodologies
<i>BMC Public Health</i>	Uganda (11); sub-Saharan region) (2); South Africa (10); Rwanda (3) Ethiopia (7); Tanzania (3); Sudan (1); Kenya (3); Botswana (2); Zambia (2); Lesotho (1); DRC (1); Malawi and South Africa (1) Ghana and Kenya (1)	Diabetes (1) HIV/AIDS (12); alcohol vaccines (1); COVID-19 planning (1); infant feeding (1); tuberculosis (2); childhood stunting (1); malaria (3); violence prevention programme (1); maternal, newborn & child health (1); intestinal schistosomiasis (1); HPV vaccination (1); stroke (1) sexual & reproductive; health (7); immunisation (1); food and beverage advertising (1); Sugary beverage tax (1); HIV and obesity (1); Parent-child communication (1); hand hygiene (1); hypertension (1); cervical cancer (1).	Interdisciplinary (24) medical (29)	Diffusion of innovations (1)	Review (3) quantitative (31) qualitative (14) mixed methods (3)
<i>PLOS Global Public Health</i>	Tanzania (2); Ethiopia (6); Kenya (2); sub-Saharan region) (3) DRC (1) Ethiopia (7); Burundi (1) South Africa (2) Rwanda (2) Uganda (1) Zimbabwe (1); Nigeria and Kenya (2)	Alcohol (1); infant vaccination (1); stillbirth and neonatal mortality (1); substance use (1); maternal health (1); health information-seeking behaviour (1); cholera (1); reproductive health (1); contraceptives (1); COVID-19 (2); malaria (1); dog vaccination (1); family planning (1); Rift Valley fever (1); routine health information (1); hepatitis (1); cancer (1); homebirths (1); primary healthcare (1)	Medical (10) interdisciplinary (14)	None	Qualitative (6) quantitative (16) mixed methods (1) review (2)

highest HIV prevalence include Swaziland, Botswana, Lesotho, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Zambia and Mozambique (Kim & Chikonbero, 2014). According to the 2011 Uganda Ministry of Health assessment, malaria, HIV/AIDS, and pneumonia were the leading causes of death, while malaria, anaemia, and pneumonia are the leading causes of death for children under the age of five.

While there are similarities in the topics treated in West Africa and other parts of sub-Saharan Africa, one particular topic that stands out is COVID-19. The COVID-19 pandemic has made it clear that effective public health messaging is an indispensable component of a robust academic response system (Nan et al., 2022). Findings revealed that the issue was missing in studies on West Africa. However, it received considerable attention across other parts of sub-Saharan Africa. The use of theory used differed across the regions: only the extended parallel processing model and diffusion of innovations theory were common. In the same vein, quantitative research methodology was also prominent in both regions.

### **Decolonisation of health communication research in Africa**

Issues in equity and power asymmetry in global partnerships are driving the current discussion of decolonising global health (Finkel et al., 2022). Coloniality restricts understandings of relations and their importance to communication by making persons, actions, and contexts seem individuated and autonomous (Hanchey & Asante, 2022), hence the need to decolonise research. The movement to decolonise global health encompasses efforts to dismantle historically inequitable structure and processes in global health education, research and practice (Ngaruiya et. al., 2024). This is because pedagogies in media and communication studies can draw and benefit from efforts to decolonise other academic disciplines and vice versa (Batisal, 2024) as folk media, an indigenous form of cultural knowledge, can be a strong, replicable, culturally grounded, decolonising research methodology that promotes collaboration and the deconstruction of power relations (Abdulla, 2024). In addition, African knowledge systems and communicative patterns that emerge from the interactions between African people, and with global

and local institutions, can reveal both the limitations of neoliberal capitalist logics and some African knowledge systems (Hanchey & Asante, 2022). An appraisal of global health trends reveals that certain people, communities and populations enjoy better health than others, and that these disparities often occur along the historical lines of the coloniser versus the colonised that emerged during the 200 years of European imperialism (Sastry, 2014).

A publication in *PLOS Global Public Health* titled *Colonialism, Malaria and Decolonization* discussed how malaria and other aspects of global health could be decolonised and suggested directions for future analysis that can lead to concrete action. The researchers (Bump & Aniebo, 2022) assert that prominent journals and leading authors of global health research are largely associated with the United States, the United Kingdom, and other colonial powers, even as their works are largely concerned with formally colonised places and people. This is true for the majority of research on Africa, where the authors are affiliated to universities outside the continent. Also, the review of these journals showed that most of the researchers were domiciled in institutions outside the country, particularly the United States and United Kingdom. For example, Thompson and Ofori-Parku's (2020) work is on *Advocacy and mobilizing for health policy change: Ghanaian news media's framing of a prescription Opioid crisis*, but the authors are affiliated to Indiana University and the University of Oregon respectively. Furthermore, a look at the editorial board of the individual journals shows little representation of Africans. Regarding the editorial board of *Health Communication*, the editor-in-chief and associate editor-in-chief are affiliated with universities in the United States. Others were from South Korea, Switzerland, United Arab Emirates, and Singapore, with one scholar affiliated to a university in Israel. The editorial board of the *Journal of Health Communication* had a similar composition as *Health Communication*, with the majority of scholars from the United States and none from Africa. However, the two public health journals (*BMC Public Health* and *PLOS Global Public Health*) both had Africans on their editorial boards. The *PLOS Global Public Health* editors-in-chief are affiliated with institutions in Kenya, Canada and the United States respectively. This will affect the

number of articles accepted by these journals and is perhaps one of the reasons why there is a paucity of articles about and from Africa in the two health communication journals.

The issue of decolonisation in global health has been based on the premise that there are unfair outcomes in the coverage of global health. While there is general agreement amongst those involved in global health partnerships that the current system needs to be made more equitable, suggestions for how to address the issue of decolonisation vary greatly, and moving from rhetoric to reform is complicated (Finkel, et.al., 2022). Olaoye and Onyenankeya's (2023) review of health communication strategies in sub-Saharan Africa suggests a need for more traditional health communication strategy based on indigenous knowledge systems, while global health promotion campaigns, on the other hand, see Africans as not wanting to adopt modern health behaviours as they cling to their traditional cultural beliefs. However, Bump and Aniebo (2022) cautioned that decolonisation is not fundamentally a rejection of knowledge accumulation under colonial arrangements, nor a return to pre-colonial conditions; instead, it is a question of how we change objectives and accountabilities in favour of development and autonomy, and how we use that knowledge to move away from the production of inequality and dependency.

### **Challenges to health communication research in Africa**

Africa bears a disproportionately high burden of globally significant disease but has lagged in knowledge production to address its health challenges (Kasprowicz et al., 2020). There are inherent challenges militating against African scholarship in the area of health communication. They include:

#### *a. Poverty in the region and paucity of funds*

The high cost of publishing in these journals together with the poverty in the region accounts for the low number of articles. Echoing this, Amutahaire (2022) and Kigotho (2021) observed that the high publication fees, which represent a large portion of the monthly payment of a researcher from Africa, deter some

from producing a desirable number of publications or make them publish in journals with a lower impact factor. Tarkang and Bain (2019) succinctly captured it thus:

In a rapidly growing scientific world and in the internet age we find ourselves today, coupled with the poverty situation in Africa, most consumers of research go for open access journals where they can access information free of charge even via their electronic devices. This has left most scientists and researchers in Africa with no choice than to publish in open access journals with the challenge of paying publication fees. The high financial cost of publishing in some international peer reviewed open access journals means that much of the research done in Africa remains invisible to the rest of the world because of the inability for most scientists in Africa to afford publication fees.

While sub-Saharan Africa spends little on healthcare, it is worth noting that the region continues to experience significant population growth, which poses serious challenges to socioeconomic development by forcing governments to meet the needs of young people (Byaro et al., 2022).

*b. Prolonged peer review process*

Africa accounts for only 2% of the world's research output (Tarkang & Bain, 2019), and this can be attributed to the peer review processes involved in publishing in reputable journals. This is a daunting task for African scholars, as these journals might take up to two years to publish an article, by which time the article is somewhat out of date. A typical example is the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccine hesitance and acceptance. Only a few studies in Africa addressed this issue in the journals sampled.

*c. Sparse visibility of research published in African journals*

Another challenge arising from the above-mentioned, as articulated by Murray (2014) is Africa's sparse visibility in research, which arose from the need to offer printed versions of journals published in Africa, unlike the rest of the world. This has

placed many good African journals in the lowest quartile when it comes to journal rankings. African researchers do not get the chance to benchmark their publications, hence their low quality and failure to appear in high-impact journals (Amutahaire, 2022). Despite the radical shift of academic publications transitioning into both digital and hard copy format, African researchers, students and other stakeholders are constrained by the cost of processing fees and journal subscriptions (Kigotho, 2021).

*d. 'Publish or perish' syndrome*

The pressure mounted on the African scholar to 'publish or perish' is another problem associated with low publications in reputable journals. This issue has led to African researchers failing prey to predatory journals. In some cases, they become merchants of their intellectual property, where they either 'sell' a space by adding their colleagues' names to their journal articles or pay to add theirs to an already-produced article. In addition, the need to publish has drastically affected the quality and relevance of research in the continent as researchers are not concerned with solving or proffering solutions to problems via research.

These challenges do not advance scholarship, especially in the area of health communication, as it can move public health from a diagnose-and-treat model of medicine to a predict-and-prevent model, with public health and communication central to promoting health and well-being (Limage et al., 2014). However, it is important to note that these journals give waivers of up to a 100% for articles accepted, especially if the authors are based in institutions in developing countries.

## **Conclusion**

Health communication is an integral part of society, as information about health and well-being can be communicated to communities and can facilitate health education and promotion. It studies messages and campaigns that create meaning in respect of physical, mental and social well-being. As such, it is a very important aspect of communication. Africa has been plagued by several diseases and health challenges, thus emphasising the need

for health communication research published in international journals of repute. However, this study of four prominent journals of health communication and public health shows a marked paucity of research about Africa. The health-related topics reflected most of the more traditional health challenges prevalent in the region, with the issue of COVID-19 being absent in studies on the West African region. Also, very few studies on the region used theory, while different methodologies were employed.

In addition, the issue of decolonisation of health communication research was discussed, with the findings of the study showing that most of the research was conducted by scholars from the United States and United Kingdom respectively. Furthermore, the challenges faced by African communication scholars include poverty in the region and a paucity of funds, the prolonged peer review process, sparse visibility of research published in African journals and the 'publish or perish' syndrome.

As part of a paradigm shift, attention needs to be paid to creating a more equal and equitable representation of researchers from developing countries in decision-making, leadership roles, authorship, and funding allocations (Finkel et al., 2022). The small grants given by African governments and philanthropies are not enough to improve research in the region. This has led to the invisibility of African research, as it is doubtful if there is any information flow to those outside academia (Onyeka, 2014). Given the decrease in global health funding, there has been a greater focus on the mobilisation of local resources as well as a call for local populations becoming involved in health (Ndiaye & Diouf, 2014).

However, the limitation of this study is that African journals on health communication or public health were not included. Future studies could assess articles in journals published in Africa and about Africa. Such research could also investigate scholars from other continents' contribution to health communication in those journals. Secondly, African health communication scholars can advocate for the juxtaposition of traditional communication strategies and Western media approaches. This will help

disseminate pertinent health information to those in the remote parts of Africa.

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