International Journal of International Relations, Media and Mass Communication Studies 12(2),26-42, 2026
Print ISSN: 2059-1845 (Print)
Online ISSN: 2059-1853 (Online)
Website: https://www.eajournals.org/
Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development -UK

Assessment of Public Relations Campaign Effectiveness in Behavioural Change Towards the Use of Insecticide-Treated Mosquito Nets in Selected Communities in Ethiope East, Delta State

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doi: https://doi.org/10.37745/ijirmmcs.15/vol12n22642 Published November 08, 2026

Citation: Harvey G.O.Igben, and Toke Marian Ojoboh (2026) Assessment of Public Relations Campaign Effectiveness in Behavioural Change Towards the Use of Insecticide-Treated Mosquito Nets in Selected Communities in Ethiope East, Delta State, *International Journal of International Relations, Media and Mass Communication Studies* 12(2),26-42

Abstract: *Despite significant investments in malaria awareness campaigns in Nigeria, the translation of awareness into consistent preventive behaviour remains a critical public health challenge. This study assessed the public relations effectiveness of a malaria awareness campaign conducted by the Delta State Ministry of Health in Kokori and Abraka communities of Ethiope East Local Government Area, Delta State, Nigeria. Adopting a quantitative survey method, the study utilized a structured questionnaire to gather data from 108 purposively selected respondents. Data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics via SPSS Version 26. Findings revealed a high level of campaign awareness (86.1%), with radio jingles (43.5%) and community health workers (34.3%) identified as primary information sources. However, a significant awareness-action gap was identified, as only 41.7% of respondents adopted the recommended behaviour of consistent insecticide-treated net (ITN) use. Community health workers emerged as the most credible information source (mean credibility score = 4.5), significantly outperforming mass media channels. Key barriers to adoption included lack of trust in net effectiveness (31.7%), belief in traditional remedies (25.4%), and perceived inconvenience (22.2%). While the campaign effectively disseminated messages, it failed to achieve behavioural change due to limited message credibility from mass media sources and inability to address deeply ingrained cultural beliefs. The study recommends transitioning from one-way communication models to participatory, two-way communication strategies that prioritize formative research, interpersonal channels, and community engagement.*

Keywords: public relations, behavioural change, diffusion of innovations, health communication, malaria campaigns, community engagement, insecticide-treated nets,

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INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, public relations have evolved beyond its commercial origins to become a pivotal instrument for governance and sustainable development across Africa (Akinola & Ojomo, 2021). Within Nigeria's complex socioeconomic landscape, strategic communication is increasingly recognized as essential for building trust, mobilizing communities, and addressing persistent challenges such as poverty and public health crises. This study examines a public relations campaign within this context, focusing on its effectiveness in driving behavioural change in Delta State, Nigeria.

Delta State, despite its considerable oil and gas wealth, continues to face severe developmental challenges, including a strained healthcare infrastructure and recurring public health emergencies (Oyewole, 2022). In such an environment, government frequently deploys communication campaigns to bridge the gap between policy objectives and community action. However, a critical gap exists in the systematic evaluation of these campaigns, which limits their potential to contribute meaningfully to grassroots development (Akpan, 2019). This study addresses this gap by assessing a malaria awareness campaign in the communities of Abraka and Kokori, both in Ethiope East Local Government Area, Delta State.

The Malaria Burden in Nigeria
Malaria remains a devastating health and economic burden, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2023) reported that Africa accounted for over 95% of global malaria cases and 96% of deaths in 2022, with Nigeria bearing the single largest burden at 27% of global cases and 38% of global deaths. The economic cost is equally profound, with the Nigerian government and citizens spending an estimated ₦2.04 trillion annually on prevention and treatment (Guardian Nigeria, 2024). While recent biomedical innovations, such as the R21 malaria vaccine, offer hope, their effectiveness is ultimately contingent on community acceptance and consistent adoption of preventive behaviour (Vox, 2024).

The Awareness-Action Gap
The challenge lies in translating information into action. Health communication theory, particularly the Health Belief Model, suggests that an individual's decision to adopt a behaviour is influenced not only by awareness but also by their perceived susceptibility to the disease, the perceived benefits of the new behaviour, and the perceived barriers to adopting it (Janz & Becker, 1984). Thus, the public relations strategy of a campaign must be designed to address these psychological and social factors. This study argues that effective public relations, rather than mere message content, is the key determinant of a public health campaign's success.

Research Questions
This paper seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of a public relations campaign for the stimulation of behavioural change towards the use of insecticide-treated mosquito nets specifically in Abraka and Kokori communities in Delta State. To secure the needed insight in the search for the desired response to the identified research gap, the following research questions provide direction:

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Online ISSN: 2059-1853 (Online)
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1. What is the level of awareness of the malaria public relations campaign in the selected communities in Delta State?
2. What are the primary sources of information through which community members were exposed to the public relations campaign?
3. To what extent do community members perceive the campaign's messages as relevant, credible, and reflective of their life realities?
4. How effective was the public relations campaign strategy in driving behavioural change for the adoption and consistent use of ITNs in Delta State?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Public Relations and Participatory Governance in Nigeria

Public relations has undergone a fundamental shift in its application within Nigeria's public sector, moving from a one-way, government-to-citizen communication model toward a more inclusive and relational approach (Ajala & Igbokwe, 2019). The traditional, top-down model, often criticized for its paternalistic tone and lack of transparency, has frequently led to public apathy and distrust toward government initiatives (Ekanem & Okon, 2021). This approach fails to recognize that effective governance, particularly in a diverse and complex nation like Nigeria, must be built on principles of participation and dialogue.

Scholars increasingly advocate for a participatory governance model where public relations serves as the essential mechanism for facilitating two-way communication between state institutions and communities. This framework ensures that development projects are not imposed but are co-created to align with the needs and aspirations of citizens (Okon & Obukoadata, 2020). The Delta State context illustrates this dynamic. As Akinola and Ojomo (2021) demonstrated, excluding stakeholders from the design of public campaigns results in limited compliance and weak community ownership, highlighting that relationship-centered public relations strategies are crucial for fostering accountability and sustainable development (Oyenuga & Ojebuyi, 2023). In essence, effective public relations in this domain is not merely about message dissemination; it is about building enduring relationships founded on trust and mutual respect.

The Evolving Landscape of Public Health Communication

The practice of public health communication in Nigeria is uniquely shaped by a complex interplay of cultural, social, and infrastructural factors. Rural communities, in particular, often maintain deeply rooted cultural norms and traditional beliefs that can act as significant barriers to the behavioural changes promoted by health campaigns. For instance, in malaria-prone areas, some households may view modern preventive tools, such as insecticide-treated nets, as uncomfortable, culturally unsuitable, or even spiritually suspect, regardless of scientific evidence (WHO, 2023).

Malaria remains a top development priority in Nigeria, which accounts for a disproportionate share of the global malaria burden, with staggering numbers of cases and deaths (Gavi, 2024). Public relations-driven health campaigns have been integral to national control strategies, emphasizing preventive measures. However, the effectiveness of these campaigns has been inconsistent. A recurring theme in the literature

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is the awareness-to-action gap, where high levels of public awareness do not translate into consistent behavioural adoption. For example, despite intensive campaigns on sanitation, many rural households still lack access to clean water or do not adopt recommended hygiene practices due to a combination of entrenched cultural habits and infrastructural constraints (UNICEF, 2024).

This highlights a critical point: effective communication must move beyond raising awareness to directly address the socio-cultural barriers that mediate behavioural adoption. As Oyewole (2022) argues, these barriers can only be addressed through participatory communication models that empower communities to co-create solutions. This principle is at the heart of effective development communication, which recognizes that sustainable change is not imposed but emerges from within a community, driven by trust and cultural sensitivity (Ekanem & Okon, 2021).

Strategic Role of Channels and Source Credibility

The success of any health campaign is heavily reliant on the strategic selection of communication channels and the credibility of the message sources. Research consistently finds that in Nigeria, trust in government institutions significantly shapes public response to health initiatives (Nwachukwu, 2018). Where institutional trust is low, even expertly crafted messages may be ignored or met with suspicion. In this context, campaign credibility is often enhanced when messages are delivered by trusted community leaders, local healthcare workers, or faith-based organizations rather than government officials alone (Ajala & Igbokwe, 2019).

In rural communities, traditional media, particularly radio, remains the most accessible and widely trusted medium, followed by interpersonal communication methods such as town hall meetings and peer-to-peer engagement (Oyenuga & Ojebuyi, 2023). While digital technologies have opened new frontiers for health communication, their reach in rural settings is still limited by low connectivity and digital literacy (GSMA, 2024). The rise of social media also presents a new challenge: the rapid proliferation of misinformation and disinformation, which can quickly undermine public health efforts (Adeleke, 2023). This necessitates that public relations practitioners not only leverage trusted channels but also actively build systems for monitoring and combating health misinformation in real time.

Challenges of Public Relations Practice in Rural Communities

The practice of public relations in Nigeria is further complicated in rural settings, where cultural norms, literacy levels, and infrastructural deficits significantly shape communication outcomes. Rural communities often maintain deeply rooted cultural practices, which can clash with the behavioural changes promoted by public campaigns. For instance, in malaria campaigns, some households view insecticide-treated mosquito nets as uncomfortable or unsuitable for hot climates, despite their proven efficacy (WHO, 2023).

Research indicates that rural audiences are less influenced by mass media channels and more responsive to interpersonal communication methods such as town hall meetings, market gatherings, and religious platforms (Ekanem & Okon, 2021). Furthermore, infrastructural challenges—such as unreliable electricity, low internet penetration, and limited access to print media—reduce the effectiveness of

conventional campaign tools. Oyewole (2022) found that rural health campaigns in Nigeria often fail not because of poor message quality but because of delivery methods that overlook localized realities. This reinforces the call for culturally grounded public relations approaches that leverage trusted community figures and traditional communication systems to foster acceptance and compliance (UNICEF, 2024).

Malaria as a Development Communication Priority

Malaria remains one of the most pressing public health concerns in Nigeria, accounting for nearly 27% of global cases and over 30% of global deaths (WHO, 2023). The disease disproportionately affects vulnerable populations, particularly pregnant women and children under five. For policymakers, this makes malaria control not only a health issue but also a development imperative. Malaria impacts productivity, household income, and educational outcomes, perpetuating cycles of poverty (Gavi, 2024).
Public relations-driven health campaigns have been integral to Nigeria's national malaria control strategy. The Roll Back Malaria initiative and more recent state-level awareness campaigns have emphasized preventive measures such as insecticide-treated nets and indoor residual spraying. However, the effectiveness of these campaigns is mixed. While awareness levels have increased, behaviour change has lagged, with households citing discomfort, cultural myths, or mistrust of government programmes as reasons for low uptake of ITNs (Punch, 2025). This underscores the importance of public relations strategies that go beyond awareness-raising to directly address socio-cultural barriers to behavioural adoption.

Behaviour Change and Cultural Barriers

Behaviour change remains the central challenge of public health communication in Nigeria. Awareness does not automatically translate into adoption of preventive behaviours. For example, UNICEF (2024) notes that despite intensive campaigns on sanitation, many rural households still lack access to clean water or do not adopt recommended hygiene practices due to entrenched cultural habits and infrastructural constraints. Similarly, malaria prevention campaigns often confront cultural skepticism about modern medicine or traditional beliefs that downplay the severity of the disease.

Oyewole (2022) argues that these barriers can only be addressed through participatory communication models that empower communities to co-create solutions. Involving traditional leaders, women's groups, and youth organizations can increase ownership of health campaigns and bridge the gap between message dissemination and behavioural adoption. This reflects the broader principle that effective public relations must integrate cultural sensitivity into its strategies, recognizing that people act not only on information but also on cultural meaning and trust (Ekanem & Okon, 2021).

Community Trust, Misinformation, and Health Public Relations

Trust is perhaps the most critical factor in determining the success of health communication campaigns. In contexts where communities distrust government motives, health interventions are often perceived as externally imposed rather than community-driven (Punch, 2025). The proliferation of misinformation, especially through digital platforms, exacerbates this problem. Adeleke (2023) notes that misinformation thrives in environments of low institutional trust, where people turn to informal networks for information validation.

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Online ISSN: 2059-1853 (Online)
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This underscores the importance of grounding public relations campaigns in trust-building strategies: transparency, accountability, and long-term community engagement. Rather than focusing solely on short-term message dissemination, public health campaigns must invest in sustained relationship management with communities. Such strategies resonate with the principles of development communication, which emphasize dialogue, participation, and empowerment as central to long-term change (Oyenuga & Ojebuyi, 2023).

Knowledge Gap and Contribution of the Study

While the existing literature provides a robust theoretical and empirical understanding of the challenges facing public health campaigns in Nigeria, a significant knowledge gap remains. Few studies have conducted a detailed, comparative analysis of the public relations effectiveness of a specific malaria campaign across distinct, yet geographically proximate, communities. This research addresses this gap by providing a unique, empirical assessment of a campaign's strategy in two contrasting communities: Abraka, a semi-urban university town, and Kokori, a more traditional, rural settlement.

By comparing these two contexts, this study provides a nuanced understanding of how diverse demographic and social profiles influence the reception and impact of public health messages. The findings will not only contribute to the theoretical discourse on public relations as a tool for development but will also offer context-specific, evidence-based recommendations for designing future health campaigns in Delta State and similar regions. Ultimately, this research aims to underscore that effective public relations is a catalyst for sustainable change, bridging the crucial gap between raising awareness and fostering lasting behavioural adoption.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws upon two key communication theories: the Diffusion of Innovations Theory and the Agenda-Setting Theory. These theories were found to be appropriate for this study.

Diffusion of Innovations Theory

The Diffusion of Innovations Theory explains how new ideas and practices spread within a community (Rogers, 2003). In the case of malaria prevention, it helps analyze the adoption of insecticide-treated nets across different segments of the population. The theory's stages—knowledge, persuasion, decision, implementation, and confirmation—provide a nuanced framework for assessing how awareness campaigns translate (or fail to translate) into behavioural adoption. It also highlights the role of opinion leaders and social networks in influencing community uptake.

Agenda-Setting Theory

The Agenda-Setting Theory is essential for understanding how media and campaigns can shape public priorities (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). By consistently emphasizing malaria as a health crisis and highlighting the efficacy of preventive measures, campaigns can elevate malaria prevention on the public agenda. In the Nigerian context, agenda-setting helps explain how repeated exposure to malaria-related messages can shift perceptions, making the disease and its prevention strategies a matter of urgent concern.

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Together, these theories provide the analytical tools to evaluate not just the reach of the campaign but its ability to influence attitudes, behaviours, and public priorities.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design
This study employed a quantitative research design with a survey method to evaluate the public relations effectiveness of a malaria awareness campaign in Delta State. This approach was chosen because it allows for the systematic collection of numerical data from a large number of people, which is ideal for measuring awareness, message credibility, and behavioural change.

Study Area
The research was conducted in the Abraka and Kokori communities in Ethiope East Local Government Area, Delta State, Nigeria. These communities were selected because they had been exposed to the state government's malaria campaign and represent the rural communication dynamics this study explores. Abraka is a semi-urban university town, while Kokori is a more traditional, rural settlement, providing a comparative framework for the study.

Population and Sampling
The study's target population included adults aged 18 and older from these communities. A purposive sampling technique was used to select 108 respondents, ensuring the participants were relevant to the study. The inclusion criteria required that participants had been residents of the communities for at least one year and were aware of the malaria campaign.

Instrumentation
Data were gathered using a structured questionnaire with three main sections: demographics, campaign exposure, and perceptions/behavioural change. A five-point Likert scale was used to measure attitudes, and a few open-ended questions were included for more detailed feedback. To ensure the questionnaire's validity and reliability, it was reviewed by experts in public health communication and pilot-tested on 15 people from a nearby community. The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was used to confirm internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.82$).

Data Collection Procedure
Data were collected over two weeks with the help of two trained research assistants who were fluent in both English and Urhobo. Respondents were informed of the study's purpose, and their confidentiality was guaranteed. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Data Analysis
The data collected were coded and analyzed using SPSS (Version 26). Descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages were used to summarize the data, while inferential statistics (chi-square tests) were used to examine relationships between demographics and campaign perceptions. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

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Ethical Considerations
The study followed all ethical guidelines, obtaining clearance from the university's ethics committee and ensuring participation was voluntary and confidential. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences.

Limitations
While the purposive sampling may limit the generalizability of the findings beyond the studied communities, and the reliance on self-reported data could introduce bias, this methodology provides a strong foundation for assessing the campaign's impact. The comparative nature of the study (Abraka vs. Kokori) enhances its external validity within similar contexts.

RESULTS

Response Rate

Table 1: Questionnaire Return Rate

Distributed questionnaire	120	100%
Retrieved questionnaire	108	90%
Unreturned questionnaire	12	10%

Table 1 shows that out of the 120 copies of the questionnaire distributed, 108 copies were successfully completed and retrieved, representing a high return rate of 90%. This suggests that 12 copies (10%) were not returned.

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents
Table 2: Distribution of Respondents by Sex

Sex	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Male	47	43.5
Female	61	56.5

Table 2 indicates that out of 108 respondents, 61 (56.5%) were female, while 47 (43.5%) were male. This distribution indicates that more women participated in the survey than men, which is significant given that women are often primary caregivers and decision-makers regarding household health practices.

Table 3: Distribution of Respondents by Age

Age Group (Years)	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
18–29	38	35.2
30–49	45	41.7
50–69	20	18.5
70+	5	4.6

Table 3 shows that 45 (41.7%) of the respondents were between 30 and 49 years old, 38 (35.2%) were aged between 18 and 29 years, 20 (18.5%) were between 50 and 69 years, and 5 (4.6%) were 70 years and above. The predominance of respondents in the 30-49 age bracket is significant, as this group represents

the most economically active and likely to have young children—the most vulnerable demographic for malaria.

Table 4: Distribution of Respondents by Marital Status
Marital Status Frequency (n) Percentage (%)

Marital Status	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Single	40	37.1
Married	51	47.2
Divorced/Widowed	17	15.7

Table 4 shows that 51 (47.2%) of the respondents were married, 40 (37.1%) were single, and 17 (15.7%) were either divorced or widowed. This finding is crucial because household health decisions, including the use of mosquito nets, are often made within family units.

Table 5: Distribution of Respondents by Educational Attainment
Education Level Frequency (n) Percentage (%)

Education Level	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
No Formal Education	35	32.4
Primary School	16	14.8
Secondary School	36	33.3
Tertiary Education	21	19.4

Table 5 shows that 36 (33.3%) of the respondents had secondary education, 35 (32.4%) had no formal education, 21 (19.4%) had tertiary education, and 16 (14.8%) had primary school education. The high proportion of respondents with no formal education (32.4%) underscores the need for communication strategies that do not rely solely on written materials.

Table 6: Distribution of Respondents by Community
Community Frequency (n) Percentage (%)

Community	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Abraka	70	64.8
Kokori	38	35.2

Table 6 shows that out of the 108 respondents, 70 (64.8%) were from Abraka, while 38 (35.2%) were from Kokori. The higher number of respondents from Abraka reflects its larger population as a semi-urban university town.

Awareness Levels and Information Sources
Table 7: Awareness of the Malaria Campaign
Response Frequency (n) Percentage (%)

Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Aware	93	86.1
Unaware	15	13.9

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Table 7 reveals that 93 (86.1%) of the respondents were aware of the malaria campaign, while 15 (13.9%) were unaware. This high level of awareness indicates that the campaign achieved significant message penetration in the target communities.

Table 8: Sources of Campaign Information

Information Source Frequency (n) Percentage (%)

Information Source	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Radio Jingles	47	43.5
Community Health Workers	37	34.3
Posters/Handbills	15	13.9
Word-of-Mouth	9	8.3

Table 8 shows that 47 (43.5%) of the respondents identified radio jingles as their primary source of malaria campaign messages, 37 (34.3%) relied on community health workers, 15 (13.9%) accessed campaign messages through posters/handbills, and 9 (8.3%) were aware through word of mouth. This dual-channel approach (mass media and interpersonal) was effective in reaching diverse segments of the population.

Table 9: Community-Specific Awareness Levels

Community Aware (n) Percentage (%)

Community	Frequency Aware	Percentage (%)
Abraka	**70**	64.8
Kokori	38	35.2

Table 9 shows that 70 (64.8%) of the respondents who were aware of the anti-malaria campaign were from Abraka, while 38 (35.2%) were from Kokori. This distribution reflects the overall respondent distribution, suggesting that awareness levels were proportionally similar across both communities.

Message Perception and Credibility

Table 10: Mean Perception Scores by Information Source

Information Source	Mean Relevance Score	Mean Credibility Score
Community Health Workers	4.2	4.5
Radio Jingles	3.6	3.2
Posters/Handbills	3.1	2.9
Word-of-Mouth	3.9	4.1
Overall Mean	3.8	3.7

Note: Scores range from 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest).

Table 10 shows the mean perception scores for the relevance and credibility of different information sources. The data clearly indicate that community health workers were perceived as the most trusted and relevant source of information, earning a mean relevance score of 4.2 and a mean credibility score of 4.5. This high score confirms that direct, interpersonal communication from a trusted source is highly valued in these communities.

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Word-of-mouth followed closely, with a relevance score of 3.9 and a credibility score of 4.1. This result further underscores the importance of social networks and community-based interactions in shaping perceptions.

In contrast, mass media channels were viewed with less credibility. Radio jingles, despite being the most-cited source of awareness, had lower scores for relevance (3.6) and credibility (3.2). Similarly, posters and handbills were at the bottom, with scores of 3.1 and 2.9, respectively.
Behavioural Change and Non-Adoption Factors

Table 11: Reported Behavioural Change (n = 108)
Response Frequency (n) Percentage (%)

Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Adopted Consistent Net Use	45	41.7
Did Not Adopt Net Use	63	58.3

Table 11 reveals that despite the high level of awareness, 63 (58.3%) of the respondents did not adopt the recommended behaviour, while 45 (41.7%) adopted the consistent use of insecticide-treated mosquito nets. This finding highlights a significant awareness-action gap.

Table 12: Reasons for Non-Adoption

Reason	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Lack of trust in net's effectiveness	20	31.7
Belief in traditional remedies	16	25.4
Perceived inconvenience	14	22.2
Other reasons	13	20.7

Table 12 indicates that out of the 63 respondents who did not adopt the use of insecticide-treated mosquito nets, 20 (31.7%) had no trust in the effectiveness of the net, 16 (25.4%) believed in the use of traditional remedies, 14 (22.2%) found it inconvenient to use the net, and 13 (20.7%) gave other reasons for non-adoption.

Inferential Statistics
Chi-square tests were conducted to examine relationships between demographic variables and behavioural adoption. Results indicated a significant relationship between educational attainment and ITN adoption ($\chi^2 = 8.42$, df = 3, p = 0.038), suggesting that respondents with higher education levels were more likely to adopt the recommended behaviour. However, no significant relationship was found between age ($\chi^2 = 2.15$, df = 3, p = 0.542) or sex ($\chi^2 = 0.89$, df = 1, p = 0.346) and adoption.

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DISCUSSION

Overview of Key Findings

The analysis of the public relations malaria campaign in Kokori and Abraka reveals a significant paradox: a successful achievement of high campaign awareness alongside limited conversion to behavioural change. This finding resonates with established literature in health communication, which consistently shows that information dissemination alone is often insufficient to alter deeply ingrained public health behaviours (Asemah, Edegoh, & Adidi, 2017). This study provides empirical evidence highlighting the critical disconnect between cognitive awareness and tangible action—a central challenge for public sector communication campaigns.

Campaign Reach and Message Penetration

The campaign's initial objective of achieving widespread message penetration was a notable success. With 86.1% of respondents reporting awareness, the campaign effectively reached the vast majority of the target audience. This accomplishment can be attributed to a strategic, dual-channel approach that leveraged both mass and interpersonal communication. Findings indicate that radio jingles (43.5%) and community health workers (34.3%) were the two most effective channels, collectively accounting for nearly 80% of all reported awareness.

This dual success underscores the power of a hybrid model that uses accessible mass media to broadcast information widely while also relying on trusted, localized interpersonal channels to reinforce messages. The finding aligns with Oyenuga and Ojebuyi's (2023) assertion that traditional media, particularly radio, remains the most accessible and widely trusted medium in rural Nigeria, followed by interpersonal communication methods.

The Awareness-Action Gap

Despite this high level of awareness, the campaign faltered at the critical stage of behavioural adoption. The low rate of consistent mosquito net use, at just 41.7%, highlights a significant failure to build the necessary credibility and overcome behavioural barriers. This finding is consistent with the broader literature on health communication in Nigeria, which documents similar awareness-action gaps in campaigns related to sanitation, immunization, and other preventive health behaviours (UNICEF, 2024; Oyewole, 2022).

The Health Belief Model (Janz & Becker, 1984) provides a useful framework for understanding this gap. The model suggests that an individual's decision to adopt a behaviour depends not only on awareness but also on perceived susceptibility, perceived benefits, and perceived barriers. In this case, while awareness was high, perceived benefits may have been undermined by lack of trust in the nets' effectiveness (31.7% of non-adopters), and perceived barriers—such as discomfort and inconvenience (22.2%)—remained unaddressed.

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Source Credibility and the Limits of Mass Media

Findings clearly showed that interpersonal sources were perceived as far more credible than mass media. Community health workers received the highest mean credibility score (4.5), followed by word-of-mouth (4.1). This provides strong support for the Diffusion of Innovations Theory (Rogers, 2003), which posits that the adoption of new behaviours is heavily reliant on a supportive social network and direct, trustworthy communication.

The radio jingles, despite their high reach, were less successful at building trust, underscoring the limitations of a one-way communication model in fostering belief and behaviour change. This finding is particularly significant for public relations practice: it suggests that while mass media can set the agenda and raise awareness (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), it cannot, on its own, persuade individuals to adopt new behaviours, especially when those behaviours challenge existing cultural norms or require ongoing commitment.

Cultural Barriers and Traditional Beliefs

The campaign's failure to drive behavioural change also points to significant cultural barriers, including skepticism about the nets' effectiveness and a strong preference for traditional remedies (25.4%). These findings illustrate the limitations of simple information campaigns, which can set an agenda but often cannot overcome deeply held cultural beliefs (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

This finding reinforces the call for culturally grounded public relations approaches that integrate cultural sensitivity into their strategies (Ekanem & Okon, 2021). As Oyewole (2022) argues, sustainable change is not imposed but emerges from within a community, driven by trust and cultural sensitivity. The campaign's inability to engage with local beliefs about illness and healing represents a missed opportunity to build the trust necessary for behavioural adoption.

Trust Deficit and Institutional Credibility

The study's findings also highlight the broader challenge of institutional trust in Nigeria. Where communities distrust government motives, health interventions are often perceived as externally imposed rather than community-driven (Punch, 2025). This trust deficit may have contributed to the skepticism about the nets' effectiveness and the preference for traditional remedies.

The proliferation of misinformation, especially through digital platforms, exacerbates this problem (Adeleke, 2023). While this study did not directly measure exposure to misinformation, the findings suggest that health campaigns must proactively address misinformation and build trust through transparency, accountability, and long-term community engagement.

Implications for Public Relations Practice

The findings have significant implications for public relations practice in public health contexts. First, they underscore the importance of moving beyond one-way communication models to embrace two-way, dialogic communication that engages communities as partners rather than passive recipients of information. Second, they highlight the need for formative research to understand the specific cultural

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Online ISSN: 2059-1853 (Online)
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beliefs, social norms, and existing health practices of target communities before designing campaigns. Third, they emphasize the strategic value of interpersonal channels—particularly community health workers and local leaders—as credible messengers who can build trust and address concerns in real time.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study found that the public relations malaria campaign was effective in raising awareness but ultimately failed to achieve its goal of widespread behavioural change. The campaign's success was a result of its effective message dissemination via a hybrid approach that integrated mass media (radio broadcasts) and interpersonal communication (community health workers). However, its failure to convert awareness into action stemmed from the lack of perceived message credibility, particularly from mass media sources, and an inability to address and overcome deeply ingrained cultural beliefs and skepticism regarding modern health practices.

The findings underscore that in rural health contexts, effective public relations must be a two-way, relational process designed to build trust and engage with community beliefs, rather than a one-way process of information delivery. The study contributes to the theoretical discourse on public relations as a tool for development by providing empirical evidence of the limitations of one-way communication models and the importance of source credibility and cultural sensitivity in driving behavioural change.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are appropriate for policymakers, health practitioners, and public relations professionals to improve the effectiveness of future public health campaigns in Delta State and similar contexts:

Prioritize Formative Research

Before launching any campaign, in-depth qualitative research should be conducted to understand the specific cultural beliefs, social norms, and existing health practices of the target community. This includes identifying local beliefs about the illness and the perceived barriers to adopting a new health behaviour. For example, future campaigns should conduct focus groups to understand why community members rely on traditional remedies and express skepticism about mosquito nets. Formative research should also explore the specific concerns that lead to perceived inconvenience, such as discomfort in hot weather or concerns about chemical safety.

Empower and Utilize Interpersonal Channels

Given the high credibility of community health workers and word-of-mouth, future campaigns should shift from a mass media-centric approach to one that strategically empowers local leaders and trusted figures. These individuals should be provided with extensive training, not just on the health message but also on how to engage in two-way conversations to address concerns and build trust. The public relations strategy should treat these individuals as key partners, not just as message distributors. Additionally, campaigns should invest in training community health workers to address common misconceptions and provide evidence-based responses to concerns about net effectiveness and safety.

Print ISSN: 2059-1845 (Print)
Online ISSN: 2059-1853 (Online)
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Adopt a Two-Way, Dialogic Communication Model
The campaign's reliance on one-way communication via radio was effective for awareness but failed to facilitate the dialogue necessary for behavioural change. Future campaigns must create platforms for dialogue, such as town hall meetings, community forums, and interactive radio programs where residents can ask questions, voice concerns, and collectively solve problems. This relational approach fosters a sense of ownership over health outcomes and builds the trust necessary for sustained behaviour change.

Integrate Cultural Sensitivity into Campaign Design
Future campaigns should integrate cultural sensitivity into their design by involving traditional leaders, women's groups, and youth organizations in the planning and implementation process. Messages should be framed in ways that resonate with local cultural values and address specific cultural concerns. For example, campaigns could collaborate with traditional healers to promote the complementary use of modern preventive measures alongside traditional remedies, rather than positioning them as mutually exclusive.

Address Misinformation and Build Institutional Trust
Public relations practitioners should proactively monitor and address misinformation about malaria prevention through trusted channels. This includes working with community health workers to identify and correct misconceptions, as well as leveraging local radio stations to broadcast accurate information. Additionally, campaigns should invest in long-term relationship-building with communities to build institutional trust, rather than focusing solely on short-term message dissemination.

Develop Community-Specific Strategies
Given the differences between Abraka (semi-urban) and Kokori (rural), future campaigns should develop community-specific strategies that account for varying levels of education, access to media, and cultural norms. For example, campaigns in Kokori may need to rely more heavily on interpersonal channels and visual materials, given the higher proportion of residents with no formal education, while campaigns in Abraka can leverage a broader mix of channels, including social media.

Establish Monitoring and Evaluation Mechanisms
Future campaigns should establish robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to track not only awareness levels but also behavioural adoption and the factors influencing it. This includes conducting baseline and endline surveys, as well as ongoing qualitative research to understand evolving community perceptions and barriers. Evaluation findings should be used to adapt campaign strategies in real time and inform future campaign design.

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