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## Producing Educational Film for Maternal Health Education in Ghana: A Semiotic Approach

Emmanuel Joel Ayu Nyarko

Institute of Film and Television,  
Multimedia Department  
University of Media, Arts and Communication, Ghana  
ejanyarko@unimac.edu.gh

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### Abstract



*This study addresses the absence of culturally appropriate films for maternal health education in Ghana, where maternal mortality remains a significant concern. Employing semiotics and the persuasive health message (PHM) framework as theoretical foundations, this study integrates studio-based and qualitative methods to develop a culturally relevant educational film. During the pre-production phase, health officers and pregnant women were consulted to establish educational objectives and gather insights into their needs, preferences, and suitable styles and formats. Feedback was systematically incorporated throughout the production process to refine the form and content of the film. The final film, a hybrid of fictional and nonfictional elements, aligns with the educational approach commonly adopted in pregnancy schools. Drawing on the PHM framework, the film's syntagmatic structure addresses themes of threat, severity, susceptibility, efficacy, barriers, and rewards. Additionally, paradigmatic elements, including relatable characters, colour schemes, lighting, sound effects, and compositing techniques,*

*were carefully employed to enhance cultural resonance and emotional engagement. The study concludes that the film serves as a culturally appropriate resource for educating pregnant women in Ghana about nutrition. Future research is recommended to evaluate the film's impact on knowledge acquisition, perceptions, and health behaviours among its target audience. This study highlights the importance of combining semiotics and PHM in the production of effective health education films.*

**Keywords:** educational film, semiotics, culturally relevant, persuasive health message (PHM) framework, maternal health education

## 1. Introduction

Films are a powerful communication tool. Their efficacy stems from integrating visual and auditory elements with narrative techniques to engage an audience at both cognitive and emotional levels (Bordwell et al., 2016; Brown, 2016; Millerson & Owens, 2008; Rosenthal & Eckhardt, 2016). The perceived communicative potential of film media continues to attract scholars from several disciplines, including health education and communication. For example, Botchway et al. (2017) assert that “films might be an untapped resource for reaching people at an emotional and cultural level and serve as a medium for advancing health literacy” (p. 260). Recent studies align with the perspective of Botchway and his colleagues on the use of films in health education. Films have been reported to enhance self-efficacy and motivate individuals to comply with health directives (Dagenais et al. 2021; Vetter et al.. 2021). A study in Ghana by Drokow et al. (2021) indicated that films encourage women to undergo cervical cancer screening. These studies demonstrate that integrating films into public health education activities can enhance health literacy objectives in Ghana. More importantly, films can contribute to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 3: Improving the health and well-being of Ghanaians by 2030.

The concepts of films, health education, and cultural relevance can serve as valuable frameworks to enhance public health education. Films are a means of storytelling through sequences of images and sounds (Rosenthal & Eckhardt 2016). They are designed to educate by generating viewer experience and convey information about unfamiliar concepts, locations, and lifestyles (Bordwell et al., 2016). On the other hand, public health education aims to transform behaviours to improve health outcomes

through organised educational activities (Glanz et al., 2008). In media production, cultural relevance implies that form and content elements align with the audience's cultural background (Afshari et al., 2024; Brooks et al., 2019; Kreuter & McClure, 2004). From these perspectives, this study defined culturally relevant film-based health education as audio-visual content tailored to the needs of a target audience with purpose of providing education. Consequently, the production of culturally appropriate films can be advantageous for developing nations, such as Ghana. These health-focused educational materials can improve learning experiences and promote a better comprehension of vital public health information.

Although film-based education has proven beneficial for public health education and communication, personal interaction and observation reveal the need for more culturally appropriate educational resources for maternal health education officers in Ghana. A research by Sokey and Adisah-Atta (2017) further corroborates this observation, indicating that Ghana Health Service commonly uses radio, in-person communication, and printed materials for health education. Although these strategies are beneficial, they sometimes do not engage a broader audience, especially individuals with limited reading abilities. Additionally, current findings indicate that health officers use social media platforms such as YouTube for educational films to support health education during pregnancy school sessions (Nyarko & Yorke, 2024). This is problematic because these sources sometimes provide poor quality, non-targeted content that may not meet the cultural and educational needs of varied audiences like pregnant Ghanaian women (Griffith et al., 2024). These sources sometimes disseminate misinformation, which may impede health officers' efforts (Osman et al., 2022). This deficiency in the availability of culturally relevant educational films to support maternal health education requires attention, as it may impede inclusive and accessible health information for pregnant women to help improve health literacy, especially maternal health. Hence, this study aimed to produce culturally relevant films for use as educational aids in maternal health education.

The current circumstances concerning maternal-child well-being and mortality in Ghana necessitate urgent development and dissemination of culturally appropriate educational films to support maternal health education, ensuring their inclusivity and accessibility. According to the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF, 2023),

Ghana's maternal mortality rate is 263 per 1000 live births. Although there has been a substantial decrease over the last two decades, the rate remains high compared to the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF goals of 70 per 100,000 live births by 2030. Additionally, the infant mortality rate stands at 22.8 per 1,000 live births, indicating that almost 288 of every 1,000 infants do not survive (Poulin et al., 2024; Tenkorang-Twum et al., 2024). These statistics certainly do not meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which aim to lower the maternal mortality ratio (MMR) to below 70 per 100,000 live births by 2030 (Tenkorang-Twum et al. 2024).

To manage this current maternal mortality ratio, the Ghana Health Service among other interventions, prioritises effective prenatal and antenatal education for pregnant women as an essential strategy that could aid in reducing the infant and maternal mortality rates in Ghana (Ghana News Agency, 2023; Graphic Online, 2017). Furthermore, recent studies also recommend intensifying and adopting innovative interventions to improve maternal health literacy rates among Ghanaian women (Ameyaw et al., 2021; Duodu et al., 2022; Tamma et al., 2023). In the face of these challenges and the extant research on the efficacy of films for health education, it is reasonable to conclude that integrating films into antenatal and postnatal education could serve as a valuable tool for improving the health literacy rate among pregnant mothers, consequently enhancing maternal health outcomes in Ghana. These issues motivated this study to develop culturally relevant films as educational resources for maternal health education in Ghana.

To achieve the aim of this study, the following section discusses the theoretical perspective, literature on film as a means of communication and engagement, and the importance of culturally relevant films for health education.

## **2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review**

### **2.1 Theoretical Framework**

This study combines semiotic theory and the Persuasive Health Message Framework (PHMF) as a theoretical framework to guide research. Combining these theories has served as a formative lens for exploring the production of film-based health education as an aid for maternal health education. These theories are suitable because the study focused on gathering health information to inform the creation of educational films that

are culturally appropriate and cognitively effective aids for maternal health education.

### **2.1.1 Semiotics Theory**

The semiotic theory is a branch of psychology that explores how signs are used in communication. The theory's development was dominated by the earlier works of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) (Chandler, 2007). Semiotic theory is a valuable theoretical perspective for selecting and organising signs (communication elements) into compelling films. Specifically, this study relies on the semiotic concepts of code and the syntagmatic and paradigmatic sign relations of the creation process. The cornerstone of effective communication lies in codes that offer an acceptable and conventional system for conveying meaning (Rose, 2016). On the other hand, "syntagmatic and paradigmatic signs describe how meanings are generated through the relationship between signs" (Danesi, 2004, p. 4) that create unique meanings based on the context of their usage. Conversely, paradigmatic signs explain how meaning is constructed based on the choice of signs (images, words, or sounds), in contrast to relational signs (Rose, 2016). Chandler further argues that Syntagmatic and paradigmatic sign relations "provide a structural context within which signs make sense" (Chandler, 2007, p. 84). Thus, in the context of film, meaning is constructed based on shots that follow and after and the specific shots used, in contrast to related shots.

This study adopts syntagmatic and paradigmatic relation signs as formative frameworks to anchor the production process. The codes in the study served as a cultural framework to frame the message of maternal nutrition, guiding narrative content and communication elements to ensure a culturally relevant educational film. Syntagmatic relations helped structure shots and other communication elements into a logical and coherent narrative. The paradigmatic concept guided the selection of characters, lighting style, colours, props, and visual compositing techniques to create emotionally engaging visuals that could serve the needs of health education content and persuade the target audience to respond to the film's message.

### **2.1.2 Persuasive Health Message (PHM) Framework**

Developed by Witte et al. (1993), the persuasive health message (PHM) framework guides the creation of educational health messages. The PHM framework posits the transient and constant elements that constitute

the content of health education messages. Transient factors include information message goals, culture, and the environment. Constant factors include information on threat and severity (the use of reasonable fear), susceptibility (the audience is at risk), efficacy factors, knowledge and skills to avoid danger, and cue factors (a cultural element that facilitates response). Several previous studies have used PHM to generate and structure health messages for safety and women's health education (Hall & Johnson-Turbes, 2015; Wallington et al., 2018; Witte et al., 1993). This study used the PHM as a formative framework to gather salient information about the content and message structure. This includes threat, severity, susceptibility, efficacy factors, and benefits. Applying PHM ensured that the film's message was theoretically accurate and grounded from the perspectives of health behaviour and education principles.

## **2.2 Literature Review**

### **2.2.1 Film Language, Techniques and Audience Engagement**

Film media are language systems that shape emotions and perceptions (Danesi, 2004). Filmmakers strategically combine visual and sound elements to evoke emotions and reinforce their meaning. For example, lighting elicits dramatic responses from viewers beyond its functional role of providing visibility, establishing mood, conveying time, and directing attention to critical areas within a scene (Castro-Alonso et al., 2021; Cutting & Armstrong, 2016). Filmmakers also combine lighting with cinematography to highlight character actions, thus enabling audiences to interpret motives and emotions (Bordwell et al. 2016). Again, camera angles further influence audience perception; high angles diminish character prominence, suggesting vulnerability, whereas low angles enhance it, implying power and authority. Filmmakers use shot sizes to elicit emotional connections by controlling spatial relationships and closeness (Thompson & Bowen, 2009). Long shots induce detachment, enabling viewers to study actors in their surroundings, whereas medium and close-up shots cultivate closeness, exposing characters' psychological states as posited by Bordwell et al, (2016). This implies that the visual elements of the film form could serve as an effective way to engage people to respond positively to health education messages.

Sound and editing techniques complement cinematic elements with visual cues to influence emotion and perception. Thoampson and Bowen (2009)

explained that editing is a post-production process involving deliberately selecting and organising shots and sound to tell a coherent story and influence audience comprehension. For example, continuity editing creates seamless and engaging experiences while immersing the audience in a narrative world. By contrast, discontinuity editing introduces tension and suspension (Kovarski et al. 2022). However, sound, though not a visual element, is intricately linked with the visual edit and can be “manipulated independently” to create an immersive experience “without our noticing” without our noticing’ (Bordwell et al., 2016, p. 264), thus regulating the audience’s visual experiences. For example, Bordwell et al. argued that sound shape image interpretation guides viewers’ attention and enhances the “infinity of visual possibilities” (p. 265). Again, sound design bridges auditory and visual elements, directing focus to critical narrative points and facilitating cognitive processing (Knight-Hill, 2019). Furthermore, auditory components, such as music and sound, prime and captivate audiences and intensify their emotional ties to the narrative (Fahlenbrach, 2008; Meinel & Bullerjahn, 2022). The interplay between auditory and visual editing significantly influences audience perceptions. This interaction is essential for good storytelling and audience engagement, establishing audio-visual media as superior to other modes of communication (Oakley et al., 2021).

### **2.2.2 The Importance of Culturally Relevant Films for Public Education**

Several studies have explored the connection between culturally appropriate educational films and effective health education and communication. These studies highlight the importance of culturally relevant instructional videos in improving learning and retention while addressing health literacy inequities across diverse cultural contexts. For instance, studies in Nepal Maharjan et al. (2022) found that culturally specific films improved health literacy among pregnant women, leading to better postnatal care. Likewise, Sunni et al. (2023) and Harris (2018) accessible, and culturally appropriate healthcare and education. Diabetes is a chronic condition frequently seen in this population. The author utilized the Wagner Chronic Care Model (CCM established that culturally pertinent videos proficiently inform immigrant populations about health issues including diabetes. Sunni et al. found that diabetes-centric films designed for Somali immigrants enhanced their comprehension, retention, and engagement. Harris additionally observed that culturally attuned videos diminished health disparities and improved refugee self-efficacy. Culturally relevant

films promote empathy and social justice in educational environments in addition to health teaching. Moreover, Cromarty et al. (2022) emphasise that such films enhance cultural understanding, dismantle preconceptions, and promote appreciation for variety. However, they further point out that culturally focused media requires a strategic approach to nurturing genuine cultural awareness. These findings collectively suggest that a deliberate and meticulous culturally relevant approach to educational film production is essential to maximise the impact of public education initiatives.

### **3. Methods and Production Processes**

This study combined studio-based research design and qualitative methods. Studio-based research, as explained by Earnshaw et al. (2015) and Marshall (2010), is the use of artistic methods and techniques to create artistic works and explicate artistic works as an embodiment of knowledge. On the other hand, Creswell (2013) argues that qualitative research focuses on capturing “multiple realities” of individuals or “the subjective experiences of people via an interpretive, naturalistic approach” for deeper insight into the research problem (p. 44). The combination of the studio-based research and qualitative methods provided a robust framework for gathering varied participants views and experiences to inform and guide an iterative “process of enquiry that involves creative action and critical reflection” (Sullivan, 2006, p. 28).

Field research was conducted in the Ga South Municipal Assembly (GSMA) in the western part of the Greater Accra Region. Two factors influenced the selection of the GSMA for field research. First, there was a need for instructional films to support maternal health education (Sokey, 2016). Second, GSMA comprises urban, peri-urban, and rural health facilities (Ghana Statistical Service, 2014). These sites enabled the researcher to collect varied opinions on the informational needs to inform the production process. This study selected five (5) public health institutions using maximum variation sampling: the Aplaku Health Center, Krokrobite Polyclinic, Mallam Demonstration, and Ga South Municipal Hospital. These diverse ranges of health facilities yielded qualitative data that “reflect different perspectives” (Creswell, 2013, p. 157) throughout the study process. Studio research was conducted at the National Film and Television Institute in Cantonment, Accra, Ghana. Both field and studio studies were conducted between October 2018 and January 2020.

Purposive sampling was used to select health officers and pregnant women from the two groups of participants. Specifically, twelve (12) health officers were sampled during the pre-production stage using a stakeholder sampling technique during the information-gathering phase as they are “major stakeholders” concerned with directly educating pregnant women (Given, 2008, p. 697 ). An additional seven (7) pregnant women were engaged during the pre-production phase through a convenient sampling technique. During production and post-production, seven (7) senior health officers validated the content and feedback sessions. A total of twenty-six (26) participants were engaged in the study.

The data used in this study were obtained from two sources. Qualitative data were collected through interviews and observation. Semi-structured interview protocols were designed to ensure consistency and flexibility, allowing participants to openly contribute to narrative structure, clarity, and persuasive techniques. The second dataset was obtained from studio practice. The studio research methods included drawing, concept development, scriptwriting, storyboarding, filming, visual compositing, editing, and reflective practices modelled on the aesthetic action research cycle developed by Marshall (2010). Thematic analysis was employed for qualitative data analysis. To ensure validity and credibility, the study subjected the data to review by health officers. This process was implemented to mitigate potential research biases. Triangulation was also achieved by comparing the interview data with observational and reflective notes.

Ethical standards of research throughout the study. First, approval was obtained from the Ghana Health Service (GHS) National Headquarters, followed by regional approval from the Greater Accra Regional Health Directorate, and then by the Ga South Municipal Health Directorate (GSMHD). All necessary approvals were sent to the heads of the selected facilities in the Ga South Municipal Assembly to access the study sites. Before conducting the study, the researchers explained the purpose to the heads of the facilities and units, and informed consent was obtained from all participants.

### **3.1 Equipment, Software Used and Crew**

The equipment and tools used for the studio research included a computer, Wacom tablet, Canon Mark II DSLR camera, tripods, microphones, sets,

props, costumes, and makeup. The film was shot at the National Film and Television Institute Studio 2. The software applications included Photoshop, After Effects, Adobe Premier Pro, and Audition, which were used to refine and edit audio. Three crew members supported the production: three (3) cinematographers, one (1) sound recorder, and one (1) production assistant.

### 3.2 Production Process

The film production techniques used in the production process were structured into four stages: content and message development, pre-production, production, and post-production. The aesthetic action research cycle by Marshal (2010) was incorporated in each stage to ensure a rigorous studio-based research process. This cycle includes planning, creating, observing, and refining. Figure 1 shows the adopted production framework (the Edu-Film Production Research Model). The following sections provide a step-by-step description of the studio research exploration.

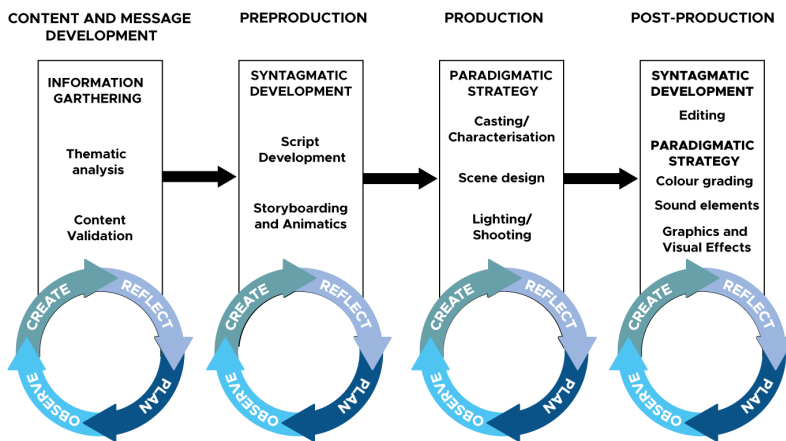


Figure 1 . Edu-film production research model based on Marshal's (2010) aesthetic action research cycle (Source: Author's studio work, 2020)

#### 3.2.1 Content Generation and Concept Development

The focus of this first phase was to gather data on the needs of educational films and the informational needs that should drive the content. To achieve this, interviews and discussions were held with participants to ascertain their primary needs and message goals, and to generate content for the film. To structure the message, the persuasive health message (PHM)

framework was used as a guide for message elements. These are threats, severity, susceptibility, efficacy, and cue factors which describe the danger of a health condition arousing a certain level of fear. Furthermore, efficacy elements educate people on how to avoid danger and motivate them to act accordingly. In addition, barriers preventing compliance are addressed to encourage audiences to act positively (Hall & Johnson-Turbes, 2015; Witte et al., 1993).

Table I summarises the project's focus, goals, and informational needs. To ensure accuracy, senior health officers reviewed and validated the content and messages.

**Table 1. Summary of data gathered from health officers and pregnant women, which informed the film' content**

| <b>Content elements</b>    | <b>Focus</b>  |
|----------------------------|---|
| <b>Project focus</b>       | Prenatal Nutrition (Four star diet)<br>The film must explain four-star diet   |
| <b>Message goals</b>       | Film should communicate the importance of good prenatal nutrition in simple audiovisual form.   |
| <b>Recommended actions</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoid Iron Inhibitors e.g. energy drinks, coffee, tea.</li> <li>• Non-nutritive substances such as “ayilo” or “shere” (Dried clay)</li> <li>• Use mosquito nets to prevent malaria</li> <li>• Eat more Fruits and drink more water</li> <li>• Iron supplements</li> <li>• Impotence of antennal clinics</li> </ul> |

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <b>Persuasive elements</b>                         | <p><b>Threat:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poor prenatal nutrition can lead to anemia</li> </ul> <p><b>Severity</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Birth complication, Death of both mother and baby</li> <li>• Baby deformities</li> </ul> <p><b>Susceptibility</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Every pregnant woman</li> </ul> <p><b>Efficacy skills</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eat four start diet</li> <li>• Use mosquito nets to prevent malaria</li> <li>• Attend antenatal clinics consistently</li> <li>• Use the pregnancy school format</li> </ul> |
| <b>Format and style and language</b>               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Friendly</li> <li>• Twi Ga, Ewe and Hausa</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Possible barriers to the recommended action</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Economic Issues</li> <li>• Food taboos</li> <li>• Vomiting</li> <li>• Some religious beliefs</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Possible channels of dissemination</b>          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pregnancy schools</li> <li>• Counselling sessions</li> <li>• WhatsApp</li> </ul>   |

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### 3.2.2 Preproduction: Syntagmatic Structuring

Pre-production involves developing ideas and concepts to inform script and narrative development (Musburger & Kindem, 2009). At this stage, the study focused on two main issues. First, it aimed to define the style of the film and develop a script that would ensure that the syntagmatic structure with paradigmatic elements of the narrative was relevant and would support effective communication (Danesi, 2004). Second, health officers were extensively engaged in generating series of ideas. The final approach adopted was similar to that used in pregnancy schools, where health officers

provide education through discussions and demonstrations (Addai-Mensah et al., 2018). As illustrated in Figure 2, the researcher developed a message that followed a clear narrative structure: beginning, middle, and end. In this case, the educational message commences with an introduction and then progresses to present threat, severity, and susceptibility messages. In the middle section, the narrative addresses efficacy, cue factors, and barriers to an efficacy response. The story concludes with the rewards and benefits of responding to and adhering to the educational messages.



**Figure 2.** Syntagmatic structure showing the beginning, middle and end of the narrative (Source: Author's studio work, 2020)

Storyboards and animatics were developed to visualise the syntagmatic structure, which health officers subsequently reviewed (See Figure 3). This pre-visualisation technique enabled health officers to observe a draft version of the potential narrative structure of the final film. The narrative flow was refined based on the participants' feedback and concerns. To avoid extraneous information, unnecessary elements are excluded while structuring narration comprehensibly and naturally, as stipulated by the coherence principles of the Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning (Mayer, 2024).



**Figure 3.** Selected shots from the storyboard. (Source: Author's studio work 2020)

### 3.2.2 Selecting Paradigmatic Signs

Characters and symbols were meticulously selected to establish an emotional connection with the audience through the communication elements. Following the approved concept, a midwife was chosen to convey the message. Twi language was employed for narration as it is mostly used by both health officers and pregnant women during antenatal clinics (Lawrence et al., 2022). Subsequently, a middle-aged woman was cast to play the role of pregnant woman. Both characters were strategically selected to appeal to diverse groups of pregnant women (Lee & Stevens, 2022). Props and objects were chosen to reflect Ghanaian's context. This phase also involved the creation of a set with specific colour schemes. From the perspective of coherence and the multimedia principles of multimedia learning, a simple, flat background was adopted (Mayer, 2024).

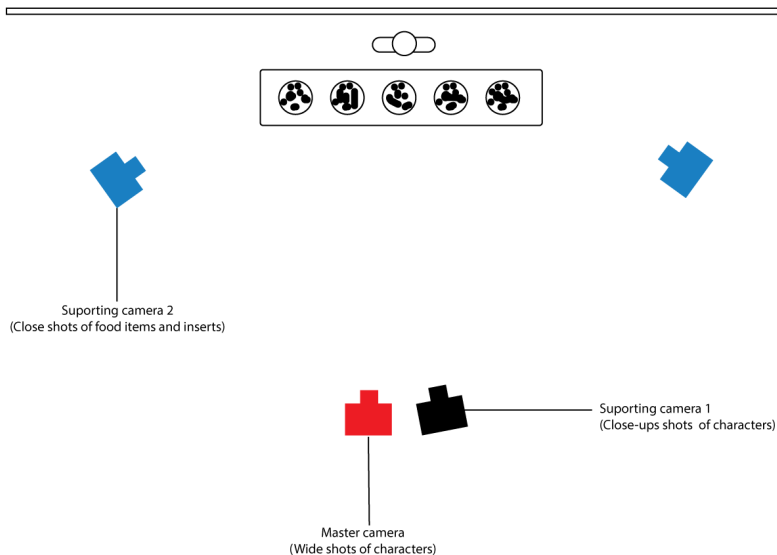
This phase also focused on selecting colour schemes and lighting to enhance visual experiences and facilitate the use of the film as educational material. For instance, two types of lighting techniques were employed: simple high-key lighting, which provides general visibility without dramatic shadows; and the narrator (midwife). The same lighting techniques were used for efficacy scenes to elicit happiness. However, low-key lighting, which creates dramatic shadows was used to depict threats, severity, and susceptibility to evoke fear. To facilitate optimal compositing control during post-production, this study employed the green screen technique to capture both characters (See Figure 4). This technique helped the researcher to manipulate the background to convey additional messages.



**Figure 4.** *Lighting and set design for the production* (Source: Author's studio work, 2020)

### 3.2.4. Production

Production constitutes the process of composing, framing characters and scene elements, and capturing them into shots that tell a story (Bordwell et al., 2016; Musburger & Kindem, 2009). From a semiotics perspective, this stage focused on giving form to both syntagmatic and paradigmatic concepts (Danesi, 2004). The researcher used blocking techniques to structure the movements of the characters regarding camera positions during rehearsals and filming. A prompter with an outline of the message was used to facilitate the flow message. The scenes were filmed in segments, allowing midwives to express themselves naturally to minimise on-camera anxiety. Using a multi-camera setup, as illustrated in Figure 5 and 6, a Canon Mark II 5D DSLR with a 35 mm focal length served as the master camera for wide-angle shots, while two additional cameras captured close-ups at various angles. This approach reduces anxiety by saving time with the simultaneous capture of master shots and inserts, providing varied footage without repositioning cameras, and ensuring a dynamic and engaging final film. Generally, close-ups were used to draw the audience closer to emphasise specific points, ensuring adherence to the syntagmatic structure to of the film



**Figure 5.** Multi-camera position for filming (Source: Author's studio work, 2020)



**Figure 6.** *Rehearsal and filming based on the multi-camera position*  
(Source: Author's studio work, 2020)

### **3.2.5 Stage 4: Post-production**

This phase involved the logical organisation of all footage, including dialogue and music, to enhance the narrative's message and emotional impact (Kovarski et al., 2022). Montage editing was used to create a cohesive narrative from the shot and audio components (Bordwell et al., 2016), generating meaning through syntagmatic associations between consecutive shots (Danesi, 2004). Before editing, each shot was evaluated for size, angle, and message. The editing process comprised three stages: assembly, rough cutting, and final cutting. The assembly stage created the story's basic structure according to the script, arranging selected shots on a timeline. During rough cutting, narration and sound effects were synchronised with the actions per the script's syntagmatic structure. In the final cut stage, each shot and sound element was refined for synchronisation with actions. Following the multimedia principle of Mayer (2024), illustrations, animations, and sound effects were added to enhance the communication. After multiple review and refinement stages, the video was compressed using an Adobe Media Encoder (H.264 codec) and distributed via USB sticks and WhatsApp for post-production feedback.

## 4. Results and Discussion

This study addresses the deficiency of culturally relevant films for maternal health education. This section discusses studio-based research results, focusing on the film's descriptions and emerging semiotic forms.

### 4.1.1 Description of the Film

The study produced a 10-minute, 9-second educational film, a hybrid of fictional and nonfictional elements. The film begins with a montage of food items, medicines, and a happy pregnant woman, showing the recommended practices for safe pregnancy care. The film transitions from black to a close-up of a midwife who introduces herself as “Auntie Midwife” and discusses the severe effects of poor nutrition on both mother and baby, accompanied by images of a distressed pregnant woman. The midwife provides practical advice on proper nutrition, such as taking prescribed medicines, attending clinics, sleeping under mosquito nets, and drinking sufficient water, while advising against iron inhibitors, such as carbonated and caffeinated drinks and “shere”, a locally dried clay. The visuals depict a pregnant woman following these recommendations. In the final scenes, the midwife addresses barriers such as vomiting and nausea that prevent adherence to these practices and highlights the benefits of good nutrition, including folic acid intake and attending antenatal clinics, as illustrated by images of happy pregnant women. The film concludes with an animation of a four-star logo and a happy, healthy, pregnant woman (A copy of the film can be viewed using this link).

### 4.1.2 Syntagmatic and Paradigmatic Elements

Similar to other media, films select and structure signs using specific codes shared by producers and audiences. In film, characters, dialogue, costumes, colour and lighting, sound, and cinematography are signs, but are not assembled randomly. Through cinematic conventions, these visual elements are framed into complex signifiers that convey meaning. In line with the view of Chandler (2007), the final film becomes a “text” with semiotic functions. Chandler further explained semiotic functions of text as

*Every text is a system of signs organised according to codes and subcodes which reflect certain values, attitudes, beliefs, assumptions, and practices. Codes transcend single texts, linking them together in an interpretive framework which is used by their producers and interpreters...In creating texts we select and combine signs in relation to the codes with which we are familiar. Codes help to simplify phenomena*

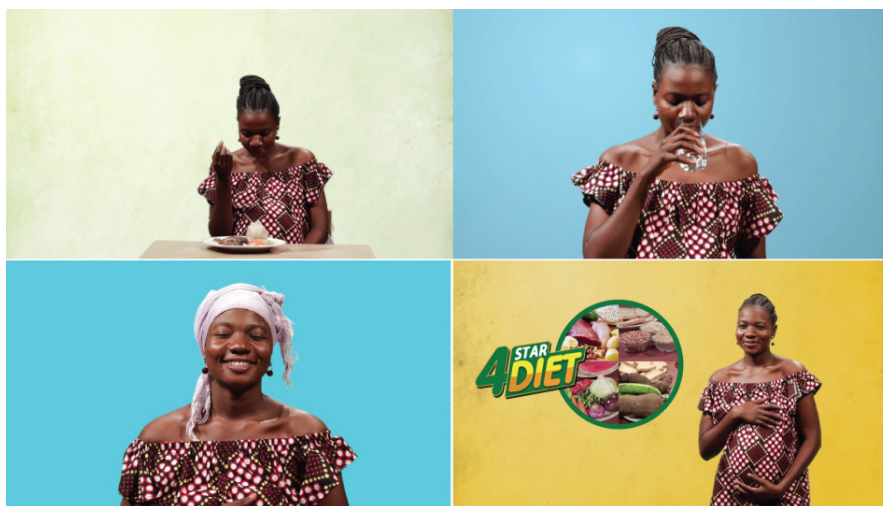
*to make it easier to communicate experiences. In reading texts, we interpret signs with reference to what seems to be appropriate codes. This helps to limit their possible meanings. Usually, appropriate codes are obvious and overdetermined by all types of contextual cues. The medium employed clearly influences the choice of the code. (p.157)*

Drawing from Chandler's perspective, the film produced from this study constitutes a "text": a product of deliberate selection and structuring of visual and auditory signs according to codes that express the values and beliefs of safe maternal practices from public health perspectives, as well as cinematic and communication techniques. As an educational film, it is intended to evoke meanings and guide the interpretation of pregnant women to align with the intended message from health officers regarding safe maternal nutrition practices. This was achieved through the film's codes and the syntagmatic and paradigmatic systems.

Codes are the foundation of effective communication as they provide a "set of conventionalised ways of making meaning" (Rose, 2016, p. 150). They govern the selection of signs and establish the rules that should be adhered to in constructing communication messages to "reinforce the thematic discourse of a film". (Yahaya & Abubakar, 2018, p. 37) In this study, specific codes were used to frame both content and form. For example, the film employs low-key lighting and dark colours to depict scenes of fear and threat, whereas high-key lighting with bright colours symbolises the rewards and happiness of following the solution. Collectively, this approach projects a cultural code that highlights the nexus between fear, womanhood, and pregnancy in the Ghanaian context, which, in many instances, motivates pregnant women to take all actions during their pregnancy (Ansong et al., 2022; Aziato et al., 2016). Thus, the narrative and visual codes approaches are a communication attempt to "guide interpretation" (Danesi, 2004, p. 21). This ensured that the expectant audience's interpretations of the narratives aligned with the intended message of the educational film.

Syntagmatic sign relations generate meaning from spatial relationships among groups of signs within specific code frames (Danesi, 2004; Rose, 2016). In films, this meaning is derived from a sequence of shots. Chandler (2007) identified this process as "intratextual to other signifiers co-present within the text" (p. 84), implying that meaning is created from the sequence of signs. Thus, audience interpretation of films is influenced by the structure of individual shots and the methods used to link them.

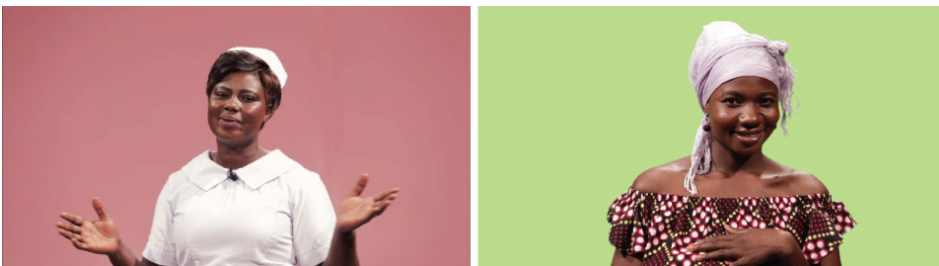
Drawing on the syntagmatic sign concept, this study structured the educational messages of this film into a coherent narrative, ordered scenes, visual and textual flows, sound, and temporal sequence. For example, the scenes were divided into beginning, middle, and end. The beginning used a threat-persuasive approach, with the midwife highlighting the risks of poor nutrition and unsafe practices. The middle scene provides efficacy skills and solutions, showing a pregnant woman consuming nutritious food and taking medication. She also performed an action to address efficacy barriers (See Figure 7). The final scene illustrates the rewards of following recommended actions, with motivational narration, and a happy pregnant woman performing these actions, ending the scenes with her looking at the audience happily. Visual and textual elements were organised for clarity using the gestalt principles of proximity and continuity. Appropriate transitions, such as cuts for spontaneous actions and fades for the passage of time, guided the audience through the narrative without confusion. The overall pacing of the transition between shots adheres to the slower editing approach. Visual continuity is maintained throughout the film through cuts, match cuts, and inserts, preserving the logical flow and coherence in the narrative. By sequencing scenes, visual and textual flow, sound, and temporal sequence, the study ensured that the film's message was logically and coherently structured to support effective communication as educational media.



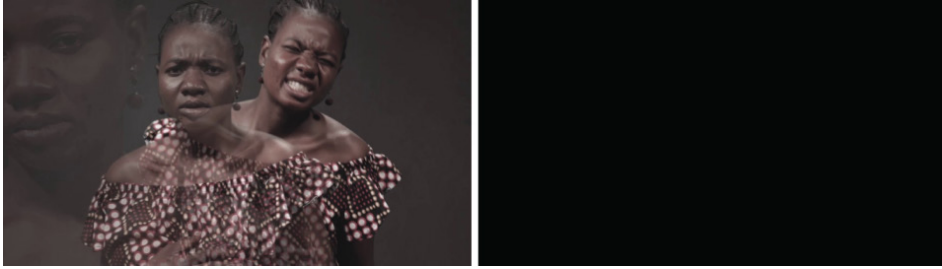
**Figure 7.** Examples of self-efficacy, benefits, and barrier scenes are portrayed through high-key lighting to communicate happiness (Source: Author's studio work 2020)

While syntagmatic signs configure meaning based on the combination of signs and spatial factors, paradigmatic relations rely on the choices of signs that contrast other possible signs that are not present. In other words, as Rose (2016) explained, “paradigmatic signs gain their meaning from a contrast with all other possible signs” (p. 142) that could have been used in a communication text. In this context, the paradigmatic mode of meaning production is described as “intertextually to signifiers which are absent from the text” (Chandler, 2007, p. 84). In essence, the audience makes meaning from a given text by comparing the existing signs within a text with other possible signs absent from the text or, in the case of the film, not explicitly shown among a sequence of shots or within the mise-en-scène of shot. Thus, choices of shots and the spatial relationship influence audiences’ meaning-making processes (Yahaya & Abubakar, 2018).

Similarly, paradigmatic sign relations helped to achieve cultural and emotional relevance in this study. This was achieved through relatable characters, relevant colour schemes, lighting, sound effects, and specific shots and language for narration. For instance, the film strategically features two characters: “Auntie midwife” (Midwife Officer) and a pregnant woman. This study relied on costumes and makeup to ensure that the characters were related to the cultural background of the target audience (see Figure 8). In addition, colour, lighting, sound effects, and compositing techniques enhanced emotional engagement, especially in happy and dangerous scenes, as depicted in Figure 9. For example, an animation depicting the danger of poor nutrition transitions to a low-light scene of a distressed woman, intercut with the imagery of a premature infant, followed by a black screen layered with siren sounds and heartbeat to evoke fear of severe complications and death (see Figure 8). For positive scenes, high-key lighting with vibrant colours was employed to contrast dark and low-key effects. Thus, through food imagery and language, the film form and content were designed to provide emotional engagement.



**Figure 8.** *The two characters in the film* (Source: Author's studio work, 2020)



**Figure 9.** *Examples of scenes with low-key lighting to elicit fear. (Source: Author's studio work, 2020)*

A significant paradigmatic element of this film is the use of the Twi language for narration, commonly employed by health officers in antenatal education. According to Griffith et al., language plays a key role as a culturally significant component and contributes to enhancing the attention and understanding of audiences regarding health education materials (Griffith et al., 2024). This was subsequently interpreted in the Ghanaian sign language to render the message accessible to hearing-impaired audiences. Apart from the Twi language, the film featured local nutritious food ingredients, such as kontomire, ademe, bokoboko, plantain, cassava, beans, and groundnuts (see Figure 9). Additional ingredients include dried fish, meat, eggs, carrots, and gardens. Furthermore, the film depicted specific local dishes, such as fufu with light soup, kontomire stew with yam, Tuo-Zaafi, banku with okro soup, and various other local nutritious foods. Through these paradigmatic signs, the film aimed to be both logically and coherently effective, culturally sensitive, inclusive, and emotionally engaging.



**Figure 10.** *Shots of the opening sequence of the educational film. (Source: Author's studio work, 2020)*

Existing literature significantly supports the film's attempt to project cultural relevance and achieve narrative coherence. The film, in this regard, enhances source credibility, which is a key element in effective health communication (Lee et al., 2024; Zarzeczna et al., 2024). For example,

Figure 8 shows a midwife, a qualified health professional, delivering essential maternal health information, while the pregnant woman illustrates the risks and benefits of following health recommendations. This approach is well-supported by the health education literature. Kreuter and McClure (2004) noted that expert sources are “more persuasive than those lacking expertise” (p. 443), and relatable sources increase persuasive impact as audiences are more receptive to similar characters. Hence, audiences are likely to perceive midwives as trustworthy, enhancing their receptiveness to health messages. Including a pregnant woman’s character facilitates audience identification and strengthens their self-efficacy. Additionally, film narrative coherence is well supported by several studies that indicate the role of narrative coherence in engaging learners cognitively and emotionally. (Hinde et al., 2018; Mayer, 2024)

## **5. Conclusion**

This study addresses the lack of culturally relevant educational films on maternal health in Ghana, where maternal and child mortality rates remain a significant concern. It developed a culturally appropriate film informed by the contributions of health officers and pregnant women, whose insights shaped the film’s content and form. The study concludes that the final film constitutes a culturally appropriate maternal health educational resource designed to appeal to the target audience emotionally and cognitively as an instructional aid for health officers. This is evident through the use of the persuasive health message framework (PHM), which guided the gathering of informational needs and semiotic theory; specifically, syntagmatic and paradigmatic sign relations, which provided a framework for selecting and organising culturally appropriate communication elements into a film form expected to engage audiences cognitively and emotionally to support maternal nutrition education in Ghana. Despite this outcome, this study is not exhaustive. It encourages researchers and practitioners to examine the conclusions of this study through theoretical, methodological, and contextual factors. Further research is recommended to explore the film’s impact on knowledge transfer and acquisition, perception, and intention among pregnant women.

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