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The Role of Visual Semiotics in Shaping HIV and Aids Discourses in Kenyan Print Media: A Case Study of a Newspaper Advertisement

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Abstract

Since the first reported case of HIV and AIDS infection in Kenya in 1984, there have been concerted efforts aimed at combating the disease and managing its impact on the public. Such efforts include clinical interventions and development of Information, Education and Communication materials targeted at the general public. Between the years 2004 and 2005, the Kenya government developed media campaign materials that appeared as advertisements in newspapers. Most advertisements presented the sanitized version of HIV and AIDS. This paper argues that the sanitization of HIV and AIDS is an “identity project” negotiated among the players involved: the media, the government, medical practitioners, religious groups and the public. The effect of culture on the way HIV and AIDS discourses are constructed has implications on the way the public views the issue of HIV and AIDS and treats those who have it. It also reveals possible sites of difficulty when government and religious organizations communicate about the issue.

Keywords: Advertisements, Discourse, Gaze, Linguistic Sign, Social Identities, Visual Semiotics.

Introduction

Pandemics are widespread epidemics, and epidemics are defined as diseases affecting the greatest number of people in communities at a certain period and moving from place to place (Kodak, 2010). The spread of HIV AND AIDS fits these definitions as it has swept around the world and in recent years centered on African countries, particularly Sub-Sahara Africa (McGeary, 2001). The government of Kenya declared AIDS a national disaster in 1999 (Willis, 2002), and has conducted advocacy campaigns and mobilization of all sectors of the community, resulting in the

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formulation and implementation of multi-sectoral HIV AND AIDS response programs. Intervention and management measures have been put in place by the Kenya government, in conjunction with Non-Governmental Organizations and Community-Based Organizations to sensitize the general public, create awareness and help combat the disease. Among the intervention measures is the development and dissemination of Information, Education and Communication materials such as billboards, posters and advertisements in the newspapers, radio and television.

This study investigates the production of meaning from visual images of HIV and AIDS in advertisements in Kenyan newspapers. This study examines one particular advertisement - the sanitized face of HIV and AIDS that ran in Kenyan newspapers between the years 2004-2005. It examines the meanings of images in the advertisement as part of the content analysis of the advertisement discourse. This is a qualitative analysis of the visual modes of signification in the language of newspaper advertisements. Analysis entails applying the Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) visual semiotics theory of analysis to analyze the semiotics of the advertisement.

Many cultural scholars in the West have examined ways in which the media and other public discourses have constructed the images and identities of people living with AIDS (hereafter PLWA) and noted that in the early days of the epidemic, PLWA were primarily portrayed as isolated and anonymous members of "risk groups", represented as faceless images of gay men, criminals, prostitutes and drug users. Studies in Eastern cultures have revealed similar early portrayals of PLWA as "the other" (Jones, 1998). Dearing (1992) examined how in Japan the news media and existing cultural models have worked together to construct AIDS as a "foreign disease" and those affected as "outsiders". Jones (1997) found that media messages in Hong Kong similarly portray the PLWA as an invader from "outside" threatening the well-being of the family and society.

This study applies the interpretation of discourses in context to analyze the issue of linguistic and social concern- the construction of the sanitized face of HIV and AIDS in the Kenyan print media. The way we talk about HIV and AIDS, in medical journals, in advertisements and in everyday talk, structures our ideas of HIV and AIDS, of what it is, who is affected and what should be done to control or eradicate it. HIV and AIDS structures ideas of society, the way we divide people into groups and relate with them, who we consider "at risk" and who we consider as part of "the general population", normal, neutral, unmarked (Myers, 1994). To illustrate the above points, this study examines one advertisement that appeared in the *Daily Nation* in the years 2004 -2005 and in particular the visual semiotics and the choice of words used to talk about AIDS in the advertisement campaigns that illustrate the ways different audiences are addressed and which assume different views of society. It also examines how AIDS talk is used in advertisements for condoms, Voluntary Counseling and Testing (VCT) centres, Anti-Retroviral Therapy (ART), nutrition and nutritional supplements.

AIDS discourses in Kenya have undergone the full cycle of reportage, that is, announcement, definition, debunking, judgment and conversion. The cycle of reportage can be compared to the identification, revelation and demystification of Magic Johnson in the American Press. In their analysis of perhaps the world's most renowned "AIDS celebrity", Magic Johnson, Payne and Mercuri (1993) point out how the construction of Johnson's "mediated image" drew from already well-established cultural conventions of reportage, particularly those used in media coverage of political figures. Thus, like a candidate for a public office, Johnson's image went

through various stages of “announcement”, “definition”, “debunking”, “judgment”, and “conversion” through which he finally emerged as a credible “national symbol and spokesman against the spread of AIDS”. These are the stages through which a novel phenomenon goes before it is accepted in the public domain as an authentic and reliable reference point from which other conclusions can be made. This study explains the cycle of reportage that the AIDS discourses have undergone by comparing the contents of the early discourses with the 2004 advertisement.

Jones (1997) examined government educational materials from 1987-1995 and found that newspaper commercials about AIDS constructed PLWA as objects of public censor, deviants whose infection is seen as the result of violating cultural boundaries, especially those erected around the family. PLWA are often portrayed as: “Others, Outsiders” rather than “Insiders”, “Cultural Outcasts”, and a strong family (rather than a strong condom) is offered as the best protection against the threat. The current study examines how stigma and discrimination are managed by the advertisements in the print media. This study examines the media portrayal of the risk groups in Kenya, the definition of who is at risk and who is the threat. It also examines the various alternatives to sex offered in the advertisement as a protection against infections. The advertisement is regarded not as an isolated instance of discourse, but as an episode in the communally constructed story of AIDS in Kenya, both arising out of and helping to create the society’s “theories” for the affected and the infected.

Research Questions

This introduction leads us to several interesting research questions about how meaning is crafted and negotiated in visually complex discourses like newspaper advertisements.

- What are the dominant visual images of HIV and AIDS and how are they described?
- How do the various visual images of HIV and AIDS function in terms of semiotic meanings?
- How is the representation of HIV and AIDS created in newspaper advertisements?

Visual Semiotics Theory

Most accounts of visual semiotics have concentrated on lexis, that is, denotative and connotative, the iconographical and the iconological signification of the individual people, places and things depicted in images (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996). The “grammar” of visual design examines the way these depicted people, places and things are combined into a meaningful whole. Just like grammar of language describes how words combine in clauses, sentences and texts, visual grammar here describes the way in which depicted people, places and things combine in visual “statements” of greater or lesser complexities and extensions. Visual design plays a vital role in the production of meaning.

In media studies, the term “language” often refers to more than just verbal language. This idea of language involving all systems of communication is associated with the modern study of language as proposed by the French theorist, de Saussure (1922). He believed that all the ways in which human beings communicate, such as through flags, smoke signals, religious ceremonies and clothes, could be looked at and analyzed as if they were languages. Saussure called this method of studying all signs as language “semiotics”. He maintained that one of the chief tasks of linguistics was to define itself and secondly, that the objects of study in language, unlike other sciences, are not given in advance. For linguistics, it is the definition of language espoused by a

theory that actually creates the object of study.

Semiotics and linguistics share certain fundamental elements: the notion of forms related to meanings (linguistic sign in language and any other sign in semiotics), that function as part of code systems (language, gestures, art, music, cinema, etc) which are used to communicate information. De Saussure focused on the sign as the theoretical and methodological unit of linguistic and semiotic analysis. Semiotics and linguistics are connected and can actually function together provided that linguists adhere to the original Saussurean suggestion to adopt the *sign* as the primary shared unit of both linguistic and semiotic analysis. The sign is presented as the most crucial link connecting linguistics and semiotics as part of a larger structural paradigm. The above notion of the sign is the core of Systemic Functional Linguistics in which language is seen to represent and construct our perception of reality in the form of “goings-on” or processes of various types (for example doing, being, happening, etc) which incorporate different categories of participants (for example, actors, goals, receivers, sensors, attributes, etc). Using the Systemic Functional Linguistics Model, Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) posit the existence of two main categories of processes of which the participants represented in those images come to take part. This study uses the linguistic sign as the unit of its analysis of the discourses in the advertisements. The research analyzes how the linguistic sign is used to create the face of HIV and AIDS in newspaper advertisements. The linguistic sign in this case includes the visual properties of the advertisement.

The study also examines how the visual texts in newspaper advertisements impact on the readers’ perceptions of HIV and AIDS and analyzes how visual semiotics are used in shaping the face of HIV and AIDS in advertisements to aid meaning interpretation and determines the impact of using the visual images on the readers’ ability to interpret the messages. Visual semiotics in newspaper advertisements include modes of signification such as picture images, participants, body language, colors, gaze, gesture and writings all of which work in complementarity to create the meaning in discourses. It is this synergy across semiotic modalities that we analyze in the newspaper advertisement.

Methodology

This research entails an analysis of the visual images of a newspaper advertisement of HIV and AIDS that appeared in the Kenyan print media between the years 2004-2005. Descriptive research design was used as it involved the use of primary data collection methods as the most suitable route for the attainment of the study objectives. The study involved identification of the various modes of signification in the advertisement and a description of how the modes of signification contribute in constructing the overall message in the advertisement. The study examined the type of visual semiotics and symbolic meanings that readers can derive from the advertisement. The advertisement was subjected to a qualitative analysis using Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) Visual Semiotics Theory.

Analysis

Following below is the analysis of the verbal and visual modes of signification in the language of the newspaper advertisements. Advertisements in newspapers use visual semiotics such as picture images, advertisement claims, body language, celebrity figure, color, facial expressions, gesture, verbal and visual imagery and graphics. The transcription of advertisements in the two-

column mode by Jones (1997) enables the advertisement to be analyzed in two different categories: verbal and visual modes of signification. The actual words used are presented in the right hand side of the column and a description of the picture is given in the left hand side of the column. The analysis that follows below treats the verbal and visual modes of signification as the semiotics phenomena that construct the discourses of the face of HIV and AIDS in the print media.

Picture presentation is part and parcel of newspaper advertisement. It is possible to identify aspects of visual semiotics in newspaper advertisements, as newspaper is a visual-only medium, hence visual semiotics (Eco, 1990). Surrounded with visual signs, human beings have always strived to signify them and use them for communication. When the images urge us to react, we are aware of its effect upon us, which is resulted from myths, ideologies and connotations embedded in the images. The picture images, body language, celebrity figure, color, gaze, gesture, imagery, point of view, and writings are the visual semiotics of the newspaper advertisement. These are the semiotic features that work in complementarity with each other to construct the discourses of HIV and AIDS in the print media.

TOGETHER WE CAN DEFEAT AIDS

2 Be faithful

3 Use a condom

1 Abstain

4 Know your status

1 Don't have sex. This is the best way to avoid AIDS.

2 Be faithful to your partner and make sure your partner is faithful to you.

PAMOJA TUANGAMIZE UKIMWI

Courtesy Daily Nation

Transcript of Advertisement

Visual text	Verbal text
<p>Photo <u>Photo-size</u>: A close-up photo of five characters in a crowd holding onto each other's left hand wrist forming a circular figure.</p> <p><u>Setting</u>: A crowd standing at a garden party at statehouse, Nairobi.</p> <p><u>Participants</u>: The president of the Republic of Kenya at centre. On his left is a woman and on his left is a man. A girl on the left and a man on the right hand foreground. Crowd in the background.</p> <p><u>Gaze</u>: All five central characters looking upwards at the reader. All are tight-lipped giving a serious impression.</p> <p><u>Colors</u>: Foreground black. Crowd in various dress colors. Central character in a navy-blue suit with the red ribbon on his coat lapel. Words in white, yellow and black.</p> <p>The rectangle with the words PAMOJA TUANGAMIZE UKIMWI and a circular shape of five left hand wrists holding onto each other as a sign of solidarity in the fight against AIDS.</p>	<p>TOGETHER WE CAN DEFEAT AIDS</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Be faithful 3. Use a condom <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Abstain 4. Know your status <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Don't have sex. This is the best way to avoid AIDS. 2. Be faithful to your partner and make sure your partner is faithful to you. 3. Always use a condom if you decide to take the risk and have sex. 4. Know your HIV status and that of your partner. <p>PAMOJA TUANGAMIZE UKIMWI</p> <p>National AIDS Control Council</p>

Body Language

Body language is a semiotic device of communication (Eco, 1990). Newspaper advertisements being still photos, it is not possible to discern body movement but the mere appearance of a character tells us a lot with regard to his/her state of health, lifestyle and what he/she is most likely engaged in. The participants in the advertisement are all "healthy-looking", clean, respectable, men, women and children from all walks of life in Kenya. There is indication, from their body language that they practice what they eschew, that is "abstain, being faithful, use a condom and know your status". The reader can be influenced to emulate them.

Body language is an important visual semiotic device because the presentation of an advertisement by "healthy-looking" characters creates a positive image that promises hope and continuity. This is the sanitized version of HIV and AIDS in the media. An evidently sick character, with a bony, wasted body, on the other hand, would create fear and even scare the readers from buying the advertised product.

Celebrity Figure

A celebrity figure is a prominent personality that the reader can identify with. He/she acts as a role model to the youth. He/she may be a prominent personality in the field of politics, religion,

entertainment, sports or education and is admired by all respondents or one that has got a secret appeal to individual readers. The celebrity has qualities which the reader may wish to emulate because of the perceived benefits that accrue out of association with the celebrity or out of aspiring to become another celebrity. Companies exploit celebrity status for competitive advantage, thus pursuing celebrity status may be a highly rational and beneficial strategic choice (Osho Times, 6th April, 2001).

The construction of the “AIDS celebrity” is a kind of “identity work” that is negotiated among the players involved: the media, the government, the public, the PLWA himself/herself, each bringing to the construction their own “theories” regarding the self and communication. When players in the construction hold shared assumptions about the nature of the self and the role of communication in enacting it, harmonious discourses arise; when cultural models among the players differ, contradictory or ambiguous constructions result. The effect of culture on the way “AIDS celebrities” are constructed has implications for the way societies view the issue of HIV and AIDS and treat those who have it. Since the first reported case of HIV infection in Hong Kong in 1985, only two HIV-positive individuals have made public their seropositivity: a British dentist named Mike Sinclair who disclosed his condition in 1992 and died in 1995, and J. J. Chan a Chinese disc-jockey, who came forward in 1995 and died a few months later (Jones, 1998). When they made their revelations, both became instant media personalities and were invited by the Hong Kong government to act as spokespeople for AIDS awareness and prevention.

The “AIDS celebrity” in Kenya is different from the case of Hong Kong because here, it is mostly the “neutral, unmarked” prominent personality in the entertainment, politics, religion or sports industry who acts as the spokesperson. This has the overall effect of working messages of hope, reward and life rather than using the damaged images of PLWA who would instill fear and despair among the readers. However, celebrity status does not always make one invincible although this is the image portrayed by the icons. A correspondent comments thus about Marilyn Monroe, a Hollywood film and music star, in an article entitled *The Emptiness of Celebrity Status*: She was the most beautiful woman ever, one of the most successful. She had everything. But she was exposed, naked, with no private life (Osho Times, 6th April, 2001).

The present advertisement has the then president of the republic of Kenya amongst a crowd of other actors who was identified by many youth as their role model. The former president is seen as leading the fight against HIV AND AIDS. Herméren (1999) distinguishes various kinds of power through which an advertisement may have a persuasive influence. There is the star power where the product is associated with a celebrity figure. This study determines that star power leads to paradigm shifts in the consumer culture. The teenage readers identify with celebrities and take up the message they send. The others in the fore-ground are men, women and a girl who represent the general face of Kenya and are involved in the fight against HIV and AIDS. Normal “sanitized” faces of neutral characters imply that anyone can get HIV and AIDS and the fight requires the concerted efforts of all members of society.

Color

Colors are used in advertisements to achieve special effects with regard to the symbolisms associated with the colors. Color appeal is used to create a pleasant and endearing feeling about the advertised product. Colors are culture-dependent in that different cultures associate certain colors with certain symbolic meanings (Berlin & Kay 1969). For example, in Western cultures

black symbolizes death/mourning, white stands for purity, red for danger and green stands for hope and life. Color is seen on the participants' dresses and the general setting of advertisement. Several colors can be found in the advertisement. The significant color in the advertisement is the red ribbon on the president's coat lapel. The red ribbon is a symbol of solidarity with PLWA. It shows that we all care and are concerned with the plight of PLWA. Red is the color of life and love. In a study of color therapy and their symbolic meanings, Marsland (2006) posits that the color red is symbolically associated with brain wave activity, increase of heart rate, respiration and blood pressure. Thus the president wearing a red ribbon on his coat lapel indicates that the fight against HIV and AIDS is being waged from the highest government office in Kenya.

Gestures

Conventionally, gestures involve the use of hands to indicate communication (Crystal, 1997). Newspaper advertisements being still photos, the reader has only one opportunity to see gestures if the photo was taken at an instance when gesture was used. It is possible to read much into even one instance of gesture as the following illustrations show.

The five characters in the advertisement have each left hand holding another's left hand to achieve a circular shape that signifies unity. This ties up with the slogan: *Together we can defeat AIDS*. The fight against AIDS calls for unity as unity is strength. The links in the circular shape also indicate that AIDS can spread from one person to another in a chain-like manner. Gestures blend well with other semiotic signs such as facial expressions and body language in constructing the AIDS discourses in the print media. Gestures reinforce other activities of the participants and help to emphasize the words which also illustrate the discourse as it is enacted by the participants. The use of gestures makes the advertisement message more explicit.

Gaze

Gaze involves the use of facial expressions to communicate an idea or a feeling without necessarily saying it in words, Kress and van Leeuwen (1996). Facial expressions reveal our inner feelings and states of being. In the present advertisement, gaze is manifested in the form of eye contact and smiles emanating from the actors and directed at the readers (who are the goals of their gaze). The use of gaze in multimodal advertisements is a communicative strategy in which facial expressions are used to invite the viewer to explore the interpretive paths in advertisements by reacting to and responding to it. The application of gaze is indispensable in everyday life as well as in business.

Direct eye contact is a communication strategy in which the actor establishes rapport and holds the goals' attention. Readers and addressees need convincing hence eye contact will help do it. It is also a sign of frankness. For example, the in-group in the newspaper advertisement have a serious direct gaze aimed at the readers. Gaze here is signified by oblique vectors that originate from actors and directed at goals who are the readers.

The representational meaning as proposed by Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) has been used to analyze the newspaper advertisement. When a narrative visual proposition has two participants, one is the actor, the other the goal. The goal is the participant at whom the vector is directed, hence it is also the participant to whom the action is done, or at whom the action is aimed. In newspaper advertisements, the participants' eyelines form the vector which directs the reader to follow the interpretive paths in the advertisement narrative. The relational interactions

are guided by the direction of the participants' looks. Facial expressions are directed at the viewer or other goals in the advertisement. All actors in the advertisement above engage in one form of facial expression or other with their goals, including the reader. The reader automatically follows the actors' eyelines and subsequently gets the message of the advertisement by getting the target of the actors' gaze. In this case the actors give the readers direct eye contacts. HIV and AIDS is a serious matter and the message about it has to be serious. The facial expressions used work together with the written texts to enhance the meaning of the advertisement (Head & Sterling, 1987). Facial expressions also reveal the characters' moods and attitude towards the issue of HIV/AIDS. Personal feelings and idiosyncrasies emerge from gaze.

The image of the actors looking outwards at the reader points to the fact that the actors are depicted as demand images. The fact that all participants in the advertisement have an outward-looking gaze means that they address the general public rather than themselves or the in-group. They demand some form of action from the reader, in this case they invite the reader to join in the fight against HIV and AIDS. The accompanying words or phrases help to illustrate their actions, especially the slogan that goes: *Together we can defeat AIDS*. Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) posit that other pictures address us directly. The newspaper reader is either the subject or object of the look, and the represented participant is the object of the readers' dispassionate scrutiny. No contact is made. The reader's role is that of an invisible onlooker. Yet the participants are themselves presented as "offer images". The advertisement offers the represented participants to the reader as items of information as though they were specimens in a display case. The actors invite the reader to join them in the fight against AIDS through their facial expressions.

Advertisements use the interactive visual semiotic features to assert the "demand" nature of the image. The fact that represented participants gaze at the viewers is interpreted as a request or "demand" to the viewers (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996). Gaze is important for passing the desired message by way of capturing viewer's attention. Direct eye contact calls for reciprocation of the same trust that the actor bestows on the reader. The reader is invited by the actors to join in the fight against HIV and AIDS through the direct appeal of eye contact.

Since a gaze message conveys one's assessment of the social qualities of one's self or the other, it usually bears certain implications on the relationship. For example, an expression of solidarity, as a type of gaze, implies that one values the other as a member of an in-group, which signals one's intention to establish or maintain a close relationship with the other. The public is portrayed as part of the in-group that is represented in the advertisement. Participants in newspaper advertisements make use of facial expressions to enhance the advertisement message. Gaze therefore, is an integral part of managing interpersonal relationships.

Imagery

Imagery are words, phrases or sentences used in a way different from their literal meaning in order to create a particular mental image or effect. This is language that produces pictures in the mind of the reader or listener (Hornby, 2000). There are different forms of imagery such as similes, metaphors, personification and symbolism. The present advertisement uses personification and symbolism. Personification is seen in the slogan *Together we can defeat AIDS*. In the personification AIDS is given the qualities of a living human being, an enemy that needs to be crushed, much like one would vanquish a foreign enemy. The red ribbon on the coat lapel of

the president of Kenya is a symbol of solidarity with victims of AIDS. The five wrists holding each other is a symbol of solidarity and unity against a common enemy - HIV and AIDS. All instances of imagery call on all concerned to join the war against AIDS.

The packaging of AIDS advertisements results in a text genre closely allied in its formal characteristics to media advertisements for selling and buying of houses, cars and second-hand furniture- small adverts which, interestingly enough, are used for trading in used rather than new goods. Consumers observe these representations and decide whether to invest time and effort in “detextualizing” them. Advertisers embark on the discourse practice of AIDS advertising equally strategically, producing versions of the advertisement for selective interpretation by recipients (Jones, 1998).

Metaphor is another form of imagery identified in the advertisement. Sontag (1989) points out the way metaphors around AIDS shape our perceptions of it. One of the metaphors that Sontag (ibid.) and others trace is that of AIDS as a battle. AIDS is mostly presented as a battle where reference is made to the “fight against AIDS”, and the invasion of the body by HIV virus presented much like the invasion of a country by foreign armies and the fight against it as a military warfare. The body has its defences; these are sabotaged from within, thus allowing invasion. Another common metaphor has to do with what the press calls “carriers”, that is people with the HIV virus who have not yet developed AIDS, so “we” cannot recognize “them”. In the Kenyan print media, AIDS is presented in images of war, poverty, disease, and suffering. At the same time, images of hope, reward and morality also abound in the advertisements. One response to these metaphors of battle in the body or vampire-like carriers is to try to reject them and stick to the scientific facts. But AIDS activists who analyze culture have tended to take a different line; they say that there is no going beyond metaphors, that the scientific facts themselves are based on metaphors, and that activists should struggle to define which metaphors will circulate. They examine and criticize popular newspaper and media representations, and offer their own alternative metaphors and language (Jones 1998).

The general population is invited in the slogan *Together we can defeat AIDS* to join in the fight against AIDS - much like armies would be called to defend a country in case of invasion by a foreign enemy. The way we talk about AIDS in medical journals, in advertisements and in everyday talk, structures our ideas about AIDS, of what it is, who is affected and what should be done. AIDS structures ideas of society, the way we divide people into groups and relate them, who we consider “at risk” and who we consider as part of the general population, normal, neutral unmarked (Myers 1994). Most advertisements assume that the audience is HIV-negative, and incarnate the HIV positives as attractive and threatening, as agents of the disease. The representations of HIV and AIDS in positive images are used to represent a negative phenomenon reveals the contradictory nature of advertisements as propounded by Jones (1998).

Figures of speech are used with the intention of creating mental images and cause doublespeak. HIV AND AIDS is a sensitive issue, victims are still stigmatized in society and they generally do not wish to confront the truth. It is therefore necessary to present the advertisements in such a way that they do not deflate a reader’s ego, touch raw nerves or present it negatively.

Conclusions

From the foregoing, it is clear that newspaper advertisements use verbal and visual modes of

signification to construct the face of HIV and AIDS in the print media. Visual semiotics relies on such semiotic devices like picture images, body language, celebrity figure, colors, facial expressions, gesture and the complementary role of the accompanying graphics to elicit the desired responses from readers. The use of “healthy-looking” characters is the most appealing aspect of the advertisement. This is the sanitized version of HIV and AIDS in newspaper advertisements. Positive advertisement promises such as reward, hope, morality and celebrity status help to create memorability and general appeal of advertisements. Changed behavior emerges only from a sense of self worth, which the current advertisement promotes.

The theory put forward by Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) provides a useful framework for considering the communicative potential of visual devices in the media. “Visual semiotics, according to Van Leeuwen (ibid.) is or should be concerned with aspects of representing social practices, as forms of life, as the things people say about social practices; with discourse as the instrument of power and control as well as with discourse as the instrument of social construction of reality” (ibid.) This study establishes that power relations exist between the copywriter and the reader by examining the various portrayals of the reader in this particular AIDS discourse. Such portrayals include the presentation of the reader as the victim, carrier, the general public, anonymous and uninfected, with the copywriters adopting a high moral standpoint from where they address the reader.

The advertisement of images of HIV and AIDS helps to achieve various scores on the part of the copywriter. It is possible to sell a product while at the same time passing across a serious medical message. Such is the case with the current advertisement which promotes ART, the sale of condoms, nutritional supplements and VCT while at the same time helping the reader to make serious decisions that are meant to prevent HIV and AIDS infection and protect one’s life.

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