

## **VISUAL PERSUASION AND BEHAVIOUR CHANGE: A STUDY OF VIEWERS' RESPONSES TO TELEVISED HIV/AIDS ADVERTISEMENTS IN KENYA**

*Ondimu Jacqueline*

Department Of Linguistics & Foreign Languages, School Of Arts And Social Sciences, Moi University, Eldoret, Kenya

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### **Abstract**

Combating HIV/AIDS has been a great challenge in Kenya. One of the major obstacles that hinder the achievement of this Millennium Development Goal is; communication barrier. Little or no information, misinformation or misunderstanding regarding these diseases has contributed to this barrier.

In an attempt to get the message to Kenyans, health communicators and non-governmental organisations have manipulated various linguistic techniques combining visuals and words to influence behaviour change. This paper examines the use of visuals in the Kenyan television to influence behavior change and how the viewers respond to these advertisements. The study will analyze television non-commercial advertisements related to HIV/AIDS in order to identify the role of visual messages in the management of this disease and explore how visual elements can modify, redefine or re-contextualize what is verbally communicated.

The study employs the semiotic and cognitive theories of visual communication to unpack the implications inscribed in visual elements.

The paper concludes that the use of alternative approaches with appropriate visuals and activities that stimulate and are interesting by health communicators can go a long way in motivating the desired behaviour change.

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**Keywords :** Cognitive, Health, Communication, Semiotic, Visuals

### **Introduction**

Combating HIV/AIDS is one of the Millennium Development Goals. Kenya hopes to have begun reversing the spread of HIV/AIDS by 2015 through increased knowledge on

condom use among the sexually active population and married couples and through the dissemination of comprehensive and correct information about the disease.

One of the major factors that has been identified as a hindrance to the attainment of this target is communication barrier. Limited formal education, illiteracy, misinformation and misunderstanding among the elite regarding this disease can impede on healthcare delivery. Myths concerning the use of condoms have also contributed to new HIV/AIDS infections which would have otherwise been prevented had the use of condoms been demystified. The opposition of the Catholic Church to the use of condoms has further complicated the issue. This calls for the development of innovative ways of communication to help break this communication barrier.

The government has partnered with non-governmental organisations in the country with a goal of improving dissemination of information. Initially, most health information was contained in sources such as the printed media-newspapers, magazines, books and brochures. Most people in Kenya have a poor reading culture and such information may be of little help in motivating behaviour change. Briesen (2010), in his research in Kenya, demonstrated that rumours as opposed to correct information frequently prevented people from accessing proper healthcare.

For this reason alternative approaches to effective healthcare communication are needed for correct information to reach many individuals who may be misinformed, lack access to printed information or have a poor reading culture. Health communicators should develop materials that stimulate thought and behaviour change among these audience. Visual material aired in the media can be considered as an alternative way of communicating since advertisements do not require extra effort from the viewer but simply form part of his viewing time.

The aim of the paper is to examine how viewers respond to HIV/AIDS related advertisements aired in the media and assess their effectiveness in health communication, specifically in attempting to cause behaviour change. The paper analyzes television non-commercial advertisements related to HIV/AIDS with the objective of identifying the role visual messages play in the management of these diseases and explore how visual elements can modify, redefine or re-contextualize what is verbally communicated.

## **Background**

### **Visual communication**

Visual communication can be described as the passing of information through the use of visuals such as photographs, cartoons, drawings, images, graphics and other

representations of people places and things (Lester, 1994). Visuals can, but do not always contain words, and/or numbers but if words are displayed they are not the emphasis of the medium. Visual material help people learn by seeing.

Visual literacy is a term that can be looked at from many fields and has many diverse definitions. John Debes was the first to coin the term Visual literacy and described it as an ability to comprehend, discriminate and interpret objects and symbols in the environment, integrate them and use them to creatively communicate with others (Debes, 1969). To be visually literate can be looked at as having skills which enable one to understand and use visuals for communication with others (Ausburn and Ausburn, 1978) and also the ability to understand and use images and to think and learn in terms of images (Hortin, 1983). In this paper, visual literacy is going to be defined as knowledge derived from visual aids or pictures.

Visuals help people remember important information better than if they only read or hear it. Psychologist Jerome Bruner of New York has done research that proves that people remember;

*10% of what they hear,  
20% of what they read,  
70% of what they see and do.*

Contrary to suggestions that meaning is transparent in visual messages, the interpretation of many visual messages may be complex and more demanding on the viewer because of the inferential dimension on which visual interpretation rests. Eco (1979) suggests that a viewer goes through the process of synthetic inference which involves both denotative (realism, representation) and connotative (associations, attitudes, emotions) processes. An involved audience extends and fills in meaning, as well as decodes the meaning.

The invention of television and computer dramatically changed the role of visual messages in communication. Visuals are everywhere today, from electronic media, television screens to road signs and retail displays

The question is what is the power of visuals in communication and how are they interpreted?

### **Visual persuasion in advertisements**

James Carey a Communication educator says

*'Communication is fundamentally and essentially a matter of persuasion, attitude change, behaviour modification and socialization through the transmission of information.'* (Lester 2000,p. 63)

Persuasion uses factual information and emotional appeals to change a person's mind and to promote a desired behaviour. Lester (2000) lists three components in persuasion as identified by Aristotle:

- 1) Ethos which he termed as the source's credibility
- 2) Logos- the logical argument used to persuade an individual and
- 3) Pathos- the emotional appeals used in a persuasive argument.

The purpose of advertising is to attract attention, arouse interest, stimulate desire, create opinion and move viewer to a specific action desired by the producer of the advert. Health communication uses non-commercial advertising which includes government notices, information and public service announcements.

Visual images have been said to have a higher persuasive communication because of the emotional appeal inherent in visual presentations.

Recognizable symbols used in visual presentation will become long lasting memories with the power to change attitudes if viewers have a chance to actively think about the content of the image and relate it to their own situation. (Lester, 2000)

Messaris (1997) identifies properties of visual communication that make it different from language or any other form of communication. These properties contribute to the persuasive power of visual images. He identifies the property of iconicity, indexicality and their lack of propositional syntax.

Iconicity refers to the ability of images to imitate the appearance of reality. Indexicality applies to photographic images and indicates that such images are physical imprints of visual reality. Lack of propositional syntax discusses the inability of visual images to explicitly express an argument by stating generalization or drawing a causal inference.

These properties make it possible for advertisements to have visual effects which contribute to the persuasive power.

### **Theoretical framework**

The study employed the semiotic and cognitive theories of visual communication to explain the implications inscribed in visual communication.

#### **Semiotic theory of visual communication**

This paper uses the semiotic theory of visual communication in order to better explain, not only visual interpretation, but to also explain communication in general. Semiotics is the study or science of signs. It studies what signs mean and how they relate to

one another. The study of signs is important in visual communication because signs permeate every message.

Semiotics emerged from the work of a Linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who is known as the father of continental semiology, he looked at a sign as anything that stands for something else. Saussure saw the relationship between the image (signifier) and the concept it stands for (signified) as arbitrary. (Fiske, 1990 pp. 43-44).

The American approach to semiotics developed by philosopher Charles Peirce, focuses on the logic of meaning and philosophy of knowledge. Peirce defines a sign as anything that stands for something else; a sign stands for an object or concept (Hopes, 1991, p. 141; Eco, 1986, p. 15).

Peirce is more interested in meaning interpretation and modes of cognition. He disagrees with Saussure on the condition of arbitrariness. To Peirce the link between the sign and what it stands for is understood by convention. This is the approach applied in visual communication since for types of signs such as visuals the condition of arbitrariness is not applicable since visuals provide cues to stimulate recognition through resemblance.

Peirce's tripartite system, which identifies three types of signs: iconic, indexes and symbols, provides a richer context for understanding visuals and how they convey meaning. Icons are signs that carry some quality of the thing they stand for. They are the easiest signs to interpret because they closely resemble the thing they represent. Indexical signs are signs that are physically connected with the object. They have a logical, common-sense connection to the thing or idea they represent. Their interpretation takes a little longer than iconic signs since we learn them through our everyday experiences. Symbolic signs stand for something through a process of consensus. They have no logical connection and so have to be taught. These signs are greatly influenced by social and cultural considerations symbols may be complex but once the meanings are learned, they are less subject to idiosyncratic interpretation. As Lester (2000) puts it, symbolic signs usually evoke stronger emotional response from viewers than the other types of signs because the symbols have deep roots in the culture of a particular group. In communication production and reception, the meaning of signs may shift from one type of sign to another as the communication act progresses.

Roland Barthes (1973) described images as a collection of signs. He argues that signs within an image are presented in various ways depending on the style of the image maker. Individual signs are thus combined to communicate complicated ideas in form of codes.

There are four types of codes that are identified in images.

- Metonymic code is a collection of signs that drive the viewer to make associations or assumptions
- Analogic code is a group of signs that cause viewer to make mental comparisons.
- Displaced codes are signs that transfer meaning from one set of signs to another. Mostly used to communicate images that are not acceptable in society.
- Condensed codes are signs that combine to form a new, composite sign.

In visual communication, we need to understand that codes/signs are interpreted based on our earliest experiences.

### **Cognitive theory of visual communication**

To understand the effectiveness of visual images, it is necessary to get to know how viewers view and interpret visuals .The cognitive theory is an important theory since it presupposes that a viewer arrives at a conclusion of an image through mental operations. Lester (2000) says that Carolyn Bloomer identifies memory, projection, expectation, selectivity, habituation, salience, dissonance, words and culture as activities that can affect visual perception. The theory appreciates that the human mind is complex and there is a meaningful connection between what people see and how they use those images.

If an image looks like one that a viewer has seen before then the viewer will rely on memory to accurately perceive the image.

Looking at a visual image every person projects their own mental state onto that image which in turn affects what they see.

Most viewers unconsciously select what they want to see from a wide field. The mind selects the familiar and significant parts of an image and completely shuts out the rest.

Expectation is another mental process that affects visual perception. We all have preconceived expectation or mental pictures about how certain things should appear and this can lead to a false or missed visual perception.

Using stimuli that has meaning to a viewer in a visual image will make the image be noticed more and have meaning for the individual.

When there are too many signs in a visual image competing for the viewer's attention, the images run the risk of not being understood by the viewer. This is because of the mental activity of dissonance which does not allow the mind to concentrate on too many things.

Culture does affect the way people view images. When a viewer is aware of signs that are part of a certain culture the individual will perceive reasons behind their use. Culture will also determine the importance of those signs.

Understanding these mental processes will help in the creation of images that will be interpreted in the way that the image creator wishes.

### **Methodology**

The data for this study was collected from advertisements aired in the Kenyan television<sup>1</sup>. Purposive sampling was done to obtain advertisements that deal with issues related to HIV/AIDS. The advertisements were recorded by the researcher for further analysis.

The data collected were from the following television commercials:

1. ‘Yes Yes’ a commercial advert that advertises ‘trust’ a brand of condoms.
2. ‘Nimechill’<sup>2</sup> (a slogan for abstinence) a non- commercial advert that champions for abstinence among school going teenagers.
3. ‘Wacha mpango wa kando’<sup>3</sup> (stop extra-marital affairs) a non commercial advert that advocates for marital faithfulness.

A small sample population of forty viewers was used to assess the viewers’ responses to the advertisements. The sample consisted of five children, fifteen students (secondary school and undergraduate students) and ten married men. While the sample cannot be said to completely be a perfect representative of the viewers, it represents a portion of the target audience for each of the advertisements. The children were chosen to represent a sample that can be used to test the assertion that visuals lack a propositional syntax, the undergraduate students represented the youth who are targeted in the ‘Yes, yes’ and Nimechil advertisements and the married men represented the target audience for the ‘Wacha mpango wa kando’ advertisement. All the respondents indicated to have seen the advertisements before.

The respondents were asked to watch the pre- recorded advertisements and respond to a short survey. The questions sort to probe the types of meanings the viewers derived from the advertisements. They were to cite the visuals that made an impression on them and explain any symbolism or imagery they saw.

A semiotic analysis of visuals was done to identify patterns of meaning construction. The visuals were also assessed for appeal, acceptability, persuasiveness, possible offensiveness and relevance.

The following questions guided in the interpretation of the visual messages:

- i. What are the dominant visual images in the adverts?
- ii. How do the various message elements function in terms of semiotic meaning?
- iii. What images will make the audience view the message as believable?
- iv. Do the images suggest a behaviour change that is possible for the audience?

## **Data description and analysis**

The data collected was categorized into the visuals and the words used. All the data collected from the television adverts was in form of narratives.

### **Narrative 1: Yes Yes**

*The advert begins with a boy and girl playing scrabble and the girl plays the word 'yes', then in the next image a girl whispers to a boy then the boy shouts the word 'yes'. There is also the image of another girl handing over a note to a boy and the note has the word 'yes'. Eventually the advert ends with the picture of a pack of 'trust' condoms and the words say 'yes' across the screen.*

This advert uses images of a boy and girl, a scrabble board, a pack of condoms, music and the word 'yes' only. There is no explicit image that shows what the advert is all about. All the children responded to have easily noticed the visuals of the boy, girl, board and the victory shout of yes. Three of them interpreted this as a sign that the character who said the word was happy to have won the game and the other two interpreted it as simply a sign of happiness. None of them mentioned anything about the image of the pack of trust condoms that appeared at the lower right hand corner of the screen.

All the youth responded to have noticed the images of the boy, girl, and the pack of trust condom as being the most dominant images. Five of them did not notice the scrabble board while the remaining ten mentioned it as just a minor image. Fourteen of them acknowledged that the use of the word yes was referring to the acceptance to using condoms while the remaining one thought it was simply acceptance to have a relationship. All the youths interviewed responded that they would like to be in a happy relationship as displayed by the boy and girl in the advertisement and if trust condoms can help them achieve this then they can use them.

Issues related to sex are not publicly discussed and teaching sex education to the youth has remained a controversial issue (much publicized debate on whether to introduce sex education in schools or not). The use of condoms in Kenya is also not a widely accepted way of reversing the spread of HIV/AIDS. The Catholic Church has publicly opposed to its

use and instead advocates for abstinence and faithfulness. This shows that the use of condoms is still a controversial issue within the Kenyan populace.

Research conducted has so far shown that there are many teenagers who are engaged in premarital sex (Mulindi et al, 1998; Nesidei et al, 2011) and so there is need to look for other alternatives to avoid the spread of AIDS.

This advert exploits the lack of propositional syntax that is a property of visual images. From the children's responses, it is clear that if one does not know how condoms are packed then the advert would pass unnoticed. This clearly shuts out children from understanding it, which serves well when it comes to issues related to sex which are best left un-verbalized within the Kenyan culture. For the viewer to interpret the images they will rely more on the mental activity of salience. This is where an image is noticed if it has meaning to the individual. The target group for this would be youths who would want to have a happy relationship and so they are encouraged to achieve this by saying 'yes' to the use of condoms.

If the statement advocating for the use of condoms had been expressed verbally, the advert would have been very controversial. So when it comes in a purely visual format it creates no problems for the advertiser. Use of visual images has allowed visual arguments which would have otherwise been considered socially unacceptable if they were expressed in more explicit terms of a verbal statement to pass to the public.

### **Narrative 2: Nimechill**

*A non commercial advert that begins with school going boys and girls engaged in a dancing competition. One of the boys wins the competition thus becoming a hero among his peers. As they go out one of the girls tries to make a pass at him and the boy responds with a two finger salute which is a commonly used sign for 'nimechill' (I have chilled). The girl is left embarrassed and she has to follow what the rest are doing.*

The students were asked to respond to this advertisement. They all noticed the school going boys and girls through the use of dressing (school uniform), the images of classes and the two finger salute. Ten of them acknowledged the fact that when one is in school they always want to identify with the winning person. Eleven of them agreed that they can do anything including giving in to sexual advances just to identify with the hero. They all knew the meaning of the two finger salute and the word 'chill' which symbolizes abstinence.

The children in the sample population responded by saying that the most dominant visuals were those of students dancing and the two finger salute. They all seemed to have noticed the word chill across the screen. When asked what the word means, two of them said

it is a form of greeting while the remaining three said it is what one says when you do not want a person of the opposite sex to talk to you.

The advert exploits the properties of iconicity, indexicality, symbolism and lack of a propositional syntax found in images. The use of young boys and girls dressed in school uniform makes students who are the target audience clearly identify with the images. The photographs of a school are more of indexical signs since they bring out the reality of a school setup. The music activity used in the advert is one which interests young people more thus making that advert more appealing to the target audience. There is no use of words to clearly express what the boy says, but instead a visual sign is used. This avoids verbalization of sensitive issues such as sex and only those who can make meaning out of the sign will understand what it means. The two finger salute is a symbolic sign since it is culturally used among the Kenyan youth as a sign of abstinence and so a mental activity that relies on culture is required in order to make the correct interpretation.

The designers of the advert make use of condensed signs to come up with a new composite sign. They make use of a school, students, music and dancing to come up with the complex message of abstinence. It makes the message clear that one can still be popular and have fun without having sex. Within the culture of the Kenyan youth, whom the message is intended for, the code has a relevant meaning but for those outside the images can be confusing.

### **Narrative 3: ‘Wacha mpango wa kando’(stop extra-marital affairs)**

*This non-commercial advert begins with images of a man and woman seated in a room watching television and taking tea. Then an advert appears on their television talking about unfaithfulness in marriage. In the advert the presenter describes how a man who has an extra-marital affair is likely to behave while watching that particular advert, such as trying to change that channel using a remote control, sweating and looking uneasy. The man in the room reacts exactly the way the presenter describes, making him a suspect of infidelity to his wife. The advert ends with the presenter telling men to stop having extra-marital affairs.*

The sample of married men was to respond to this advert. All the respondents acknowledged that the advertisement makes them uncomfortable when they watch it in front of the whole family. They easily noticed all the images that appear on the screen. Six out of the sample population responded that they are always tempted to change the channel since they are mostly the ones with the remote control while the remaining four said they try to busy themselves with other things when the advert is aired. They all agreed to the fact that

the behaviour described in the advertisement presents reactions which are familiar especially when one has an extra- marital affair.

This advert is easy to interpret since it makes use of iconic signs. The image of a happy couple seated clearly shows what every family can identify with. The man and woman represent a husband and wife, the signs closely resemble what an ideal family looks like, clearly showing that no home is safe from HIV/AIDS. The designer of the advert has used metonymic codes to drive the viewer to make an assumption that the room is the family's living room since there are images of a couch, table and television.

Through the mental process of salience more people will notice the advert because of the use of a celebrity who is known among Kenyans.

Aspects of culture come in since in most Kenyan homes men are the ones who control the television's remote control and keep switching from one channel to the other.

The advert can be said to have visual persuasion since the argument presented is logical making it a reality to married couples that they are not safe from HIV infection their home if they are not faithful to each other.

The iconicity of the visual image can elicit feelings of guilt in any man who has an extra-marital affair and is watching that advert with his wife thus causing behavior change.

### **Conclusions**

The paper concludes that creating health messages that have interesting visuals can go a long way in encouraging behaviour change and the use of condoms in the quest to combat HIV/AIDS.

Since Kenya is still a country that culturally shy's off from candidly talking about sexual issues, then creating HIV/AIDS messages can be a little tricky. However, lack of propositional syntax in visual images opens up a new way for advertisers to create such messages without worrying about raising controversial issues or making the advert illegal. Health communication that advocates for the use of condom to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDs among the youth and married people can exploit the use of visual images which carry an implicit message without necessarily being offensive to the public or going against any religious beliefs. The use of symbolic signs that have elements that can be identified and understood by the targeted viewers only are also appropriate for messages that do not have a wider societal acceptance such as the HIV/AIDS messages.

It was noted that adverts with iconic elements communicate more immediately than symbolic or indexical elements. These messages are easier to interpret and elicit higher emotional appeals. For messages where behaviour change is required the use of iconic images

creates a more immediate impact. Messages that caution against certain behaviours that can lead to the spread of HIV/AIDS can make use of iconic signs effectively.

### **Recommendations**

The study recommends that as health communicators design adverts for the media, the choice and creation of visuals should be guided by the following basic criteria:

- i. Relevance: Visuals must be culturally appropriate and meaningful to the audience by reflecting the ethnic and cultural background of the intended audience. It is clear that the way a person interprets or understands a picture depends on his/her upbringing, culture, past experiences and living environment. The images should also represent how the audience would do certain activities under normal circumstances. Creators should ensure the images enhance the message being delivered, not compete with it.
- ii. Attractive: the visuals used should be appealing to the intended audience through the use of relevant colour and activities that are familiar and interesting to that audience.
- iii. Persuasiveness: the argument presented by the visuals should be logical, credible and have an emotional appeal in order to motivate change in behaviour, beliefs and attitudes among the viewers.
- iv. Comprehensiveness: visuals should clearly depict the messages' focus. They should show specific examples of the behaviour described and consequences of that behaviour.
- v. Acceptability: Visuals should be acceptable within the particular society where they are used. They should be images that are compelling and yet should not stereotype individuals.

### **Notes**

1. Advertisements collected from the Kenyan Television Network (KTN) and Citizen Media in Kenya as aired between June and August 2011.
2. *Nimechill*- this is a ‘sheng’ word ( a language that combines English and Kiswahili or any other Kenyan languages) It is a slogan commonly used by the youth to show abstinence. It is visually illustrated by a two finger salute. The word is coined from the Kiswahili morpheme ‘nime- ‘which stands for I have and the English word Chill. It is commonly used in the campaign against premarital sex which is targeted at the Kenyan youth.
3. *Wacha mpango wa kando* (stop extra marital affairs)- In Kenya the idea of having an extra marital affair is commonly referred to as ‘mpango wa kando’ a Kiswahili

expression which if literally translated to English means ‘a side arrangement’ it attaches a negative connotation to extramarital affairs. In most of the campaigns against HIV /AIDs this term is commonly used to address married people.

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